

Passage

After the Bar Mitzvah boy's speech, delivered between the main course and the mousse, Mendel Kozminski, one of the guests, approached Itzchak Glatstein at the head-table.

"Mazel tov, zeide, you must be very proud," he said, shaking the older man's hand.

"Proud? My word! Did you hear the speech? Jewels, his words, pearls."

As he laughed, Itzchak Glatstein showed his teeth, and wrinkles, plentiful and deep, concertinaed at the corners of his eyes.

"And what did you think of him this morning, heh? The way he sang his portion in shul. . . His grandmother wept from joy."

"A clever boy, a lovely boy," Mendel Kozminski said. "He has a golden head."

"May all God's children be so blessed."

"Amen."

As Mendel Kozminski, having said his piece, ambled back to his seat, Itzchak Glatstein looked once more at his grandson who, sitting between his parents, positively glowed. In his newly-tailored velvet suit and his red bow-tie, young Justin looked quite a dandy. He must have said something smart for his mother leaned over to peck him on the cheek, his father and sister burst into lively laughter, and even the rabbi smiled.

The band struck up again and played long-familiar folk melodies from home — as it was affectionately called, "fun der heym" — that brought several of the guests to livelier animation. They clapped and hummed and sang, and the faces of those old enough to remember shone.

"May all God's children be so blessed," Itzchak Glatstein repeated, this time nudging his wife to have her share his pleasure.

"He's a darling," Leah Glatstein said in response, absently plucking at pink and white carnations before her.

"Can you imagine it, Leah? — How many of our generation have survived to see their grandson's Bar Mitzvah?"

"It's a miracle," said Leah Glatstein, looking into meditations of her own.

"We should be grateful."

Itzchak Glatstein, at seventy, indeed swelled with gratitude, wondering sometimes, in moments when he thrilled to the tremulous stirrings of his spirit, how he might contain it all, as he wondered now, his throat constricted in the delirious suffocation of joy. For, God be thanked, he had survived. And endured. And thrived. Even though there had been a time when, daring to contemplate the future, he could not see beyond the next day and even that had been uncertain, indeed unattainably remote.

He had not always been so grateful. Buchenwald had sorely chastised his faith, the back-breaking seemingly interminable days in the quarries, the death of comrades, and the unremitting hunger all together lashing at his sensibilities, while somewhere his wife and infant son, if still living, wandered or languished in some other corner of Europe. What had sustained him in those long months, through typhus and dysentery and the rancid stench of faeces and flesh, even long after he could only guess at, but gave credit of a sort to the obduracy of animal instinct, to the viability of a deeper, unsuspected, because untested, physical resilience, and, more enduringly, to the indiscriminate haphazard workings of what he came to designate as chance. If during those interminable months of suffering, he had not cursed God for his affliction, neither did he at war's end, praise Him for his deliverance. When the liberating forces entered the camp on the eleventh of April 1945, it was not heavenward that he turned his face, but rather to an American soldier, a pimply youth of barely twenty, upon whom he threw his emaciated body and to whom he clung with the steadfast clasp of thanksgiving.

And it was to yet another mortal, a harried official of the United Nations Relief and Welfare Agency, that he cleaved when the news of his wife's whereabouts became known, clinging this time to the man's lips with an intensity that approached adoration. He joined Leah and the boy, now turned eight, at the St. Ottilien railway station, where they were waiting, in the Spring of the following year on a day of inauspicious rain and unseasonal hail. The trio, drawn into a huddle, got drenched, but having endured worse — he in

Buchenwald and Leah with David in the hoar-frost and frigid exile of Siberia — they were prepared, willing even to accept whatever adversity mere nature could devise for them.

Seven months had they remained in the St. Ottilien DP camp, marking time, until, handed the opportunity, and a direction in which to move, they had packed their possessions into a single borrowed suitcase and boarded the train that was to transport them westward, away from Warsaw, their pre-War home, away from the scenes of their enduring, away above all, in so far as it was possible, from the reverberating echoes of a life stalked by the past.

In Paris, their next stop, began the process of reconstruction — a webbing together of the tatters of Europe's bitter legacy. Work, money, clothes, food, even humour assumed a new, yet distantly familiar, importance; the will, so sorely battered, could once more be cajoled into looking to the future; while the spirit could draw breath again, eager now to entertain and be entertained, with neither guilt nor excessive melancholy, at the Opera, the cinema, or more simply over coffee in the Belleville where one might discover again, with surprise and gladness, a recognisable face from home.

There were many among the survivors who had coursed the same westward stream. And for a time, Itzchak and Leah Glatstein, even in their homelessness, felt consoled. But the human stream moved on, gaining impetus from the alchemy of rumour and fear, rumour and fear of continued war and of further incarceration, of menaces real if again not fully comprehended. And it drew the Glatsteins with it, carrying them across the vineyards of France and through the unspoiled Pennine Alps, taking them to the port of Genoa where an old, rusted, mottled liner waited, chartered to transport them over vast waters to a distant, safer, quieter unmolested haven that was Australia.

That had been in 1950.

If the new country did not appear instantly hospitable, it permitted the newcomers at least to draw deep unhurried breaths as, tentatively, they sank fresh roots into mercifully unresisting soil. Within a week, the staples of living were attended to. Work was obtained; David, now twelve, despatched to school; the first utensils and pillow-cases bought; the teeth broken over English phrases gleaned at the factory and practised before the mirror in the single room

offered them by the Jewish Welfare and Relief Society. The pangs of exile and homesickness did gnaw at the sensibilities where left unguarded, and there were times when the anxiety of mind swelled with doubts almost too burdensome to contain. But Itzchak Glatstein decided early on that to the devastation of the past there was no turning back and he set his face to building, at forty-two, upon the rubble of his earlier life.

And trusting to his own labours, he had built well. The twelve to fourteen hours a day spent behind the machines in Flinders Lane and at home stitching collars on to shirts might have assumed a mystical quality, had he at the time been that way inclined, as, piecemeal, with Leah's support at every step, he accrued the means, first, to move to a house of their own in growing Balwyn, and, in time to establish his own shirt factory in North Fitzroy. At fifty-five, he was comfortably placed; at sixty, could turn his resources into real estate; and, at sixty-five, secure and content, could sit back, to contemplate his success, to nurture his spirit and, chief among his delights, to enjoy his grandchildren in their growth.

But there had been crises along the way. When David, in his third year in Commerce, brought home Jennifer Griffiths, a fellow student, his action was as unexpected as it was unnerving. Though sometimes volatile and certainly strong-minded, David never had been wilful. And if he paid little heed to Jewish sentiment, Itzchak Glatstein came to recognise, it was because he himself, Itzchak, and Leah has subordinated Jewish observance — Sabbath candles, worship, Pesach, Chanukah — to the more immediate need to establish roots and fortify the new foundations. There had followed arguments, importunings, recriminations, tears. David talked of marrying Jennifer. Leah wouldn't hear of it while Itzchak, the father, alternately threatened and begged, evoking his years in Buchenwald, their wanderings through Europe and the deaths of millions as witness.

"Is that why we suffered, what we survived for?" he asked, "So that you should cease to be a Jew?"

To which David pouted his lips, blew down his nose and said, "But that's all in the past and this is Australia," leaving his parents no way of reaching him.

The matter had strained the household for eight months and then blew over. For reasons which Itzchak Glatstein

never learnt — his son was scarcely forthcoming with confidences — David stopped meeting with Jennifer and ceased to talk about her. Instead, he paid more attention to his studies and, quite unexpectedly, took also to reading Jewish history. Itzchak Glatstein had been gratified by this change of heart and, more, came close to rejoicing when, months later, David brought home Irene Pruzanski, a student-teacher who spoke mame-loshen with fluent ease. And rejoice he did when, shortly after, David and Irene became engaged.

Their subsequent marriage had proved a festive affair, and, in time, the newly-weds proved a well-matched pair. Industrious — David as accountant and Irene as teacher — and clear-sighted, they beat the straight unquestioning path to security and comfort, embodied in telling solidity of mortar and brick. Itzchak Glatstein had blessed them — in a secular way, which, after Buchenwald, was the most natural to him — and had prayed, again in a secular way, that the couple could be spared even a fraction of the uprootedness and exile he himself had known, and proceeded to bolster his prayer with practical acts, now in the provision of a lounge suite, now of light-fittings, or a buffet, curtains, carpets, and, upon Justin's birth, a complete selection of baby furniture.

These might have been halcyon days. Itzchak Glatstein prospered; he saw David well-established; Justin, after initial tardiness, thrived; and Irene, as though she were his own, fondly called him "Dad". Australia, he was pleased to say, and to repeat whenever occasion arose, had dealt gently with him through the years.

He had learnt long before to temper enthusiasm with moderation, but he found himself nevertheless unprepared when Leah, his wife, disturbed and almost shattered his euphoria. Uncharacteristically, Leah had become irritable and tired, slept badly, ate poorly, and lost interest in everything that, earlier, had mattered — her appearance, her household, her grandchild. Itzchak Glatstein dismissed her moodiness light-heartedly as the "change of life" and for a while, nothing more was said. But when he saw Leah beginning to waste, he grew more alarmed and persuaded her, against considerable resistance, to visit a doctor. There followed tests, specialists, pills and, at the end, the terrible, life-darkening revelation that she had bowel cancer.

Leah fell apart, even as Itzchak Glatstein, himself shaken, did his utmost to sustain her, and it seemed for a while that she would refuse all manner of treatment. "You've gone through worse than this," he had said, "and survived." But regressed into her own dark and morbid cocoon, she answered, "I had more energy once and living seemed important, but now. . ." He pleaded with her to take treatment, repeatedly and passionately, as did David, and Irene who, in the flush of her second pregnancy, gave Leah the most worthwhile reason for continuing to live or, at least, to care. And Itzchak Glatstein had prayed then, prayed again, not in a secular way now but with a fullness of spirit, beseeching God, "Oh God, my God", to intervene to give courage to Leah and strength to himself.

It was only with the birth of Sharon that Leah relented and underwent surgery. And Itzchak Glatstein who, in times past, had lost his God, discovered Him again and praised Him and thanked Him for His mercy and he prayed yet again, his spirit throbbing, buoyed now by the surgeon's assurances that surgical intervention had been in time, the cancer wholly removed and his wife restored to former health.

Stirred by a fresh lively melody, Itzchak Glatstein emerged, serene, from the interstices of memory and thought.

At the tables before him, the guests sat chatting, laughing, clapping. The music played, and Itzchak Glatstein watched the lights as they shimmered in champagne and trembled on the crystal of necklace, brooch and ring.

"God, my God," he murmured, "it *is* a miracle."

He was among survivors, Mendel Kozminski, Nahum Geist, Sigmund Benedykt, Jacob Flantz, redeemed from Buchenwald, Treblinka, Theresienstadt, Belsen, secure now and prosperous in a country far from home.

"Leah, mine," he said, touching his wife's arm, "who would ever, who *could* ever have believed. . .?"

His wife had wept earlier in the day, when in the synagogue she had seen her grandson sing his portion before the Law. He had understood her emotion then. As he often said, "If anyone's heart is made of sponge. . ." But he was not prepared now, in the wake of the homely music, the colour, the shimmering glitter, and the zestful noisy movement of the guests in song and laughter for another display of tears. She was straining to contain herself but her exertion, however

disguised, only heightened the distortion of her features, her lips pursed, the point of her nose pinched, her cheeks sucked tightly inward. Glatstein saw her turn away from him but pressing her arm now where before he had only touched he coaxed her back.

“What’s the matter?” he asked, jesting without jest. “Has someone pricked you with thorns?”

Leah turned towards him but, before the guests, kept her face lowered and fidgeted with her rings.

“Don’t you see what this means?” she said, bringing a hand to her mouth.

“This?”

“The Bar Mitzvah. . . This. . . The little one. . . He has now become a man . . . a Jew . . . a full Jew. . .”

Something of that illness of hers came back to weigh upon Itzchak Glatstein then, the most fleeting of images of Leah’s one-time destitution, but transcending even this, striking with sudden menacing violence was another vision, that recollection of quarries, of frost, barbed wire, overflowing hospitals and mortuaries, and the rancid smell of death, the ugliness of brutality and the futility of martyrdom. Faces returned then, countenances little different from those before him, of Kozminski and Geist, Benedykt and Flantz, whose eyes were shot forever blind and voices forever silent, cheeks scalloped, brows grimy and transparent, hands mere tuber, boss and bone. And in their midst, he saw Justin, his grandson, a man now, skeletal, emaciated, yellow-eyed, bowed beneath a burden his fragile body could scarcely carry.

From several seats away, his son’s boisterous laughter brought him back to the firmer yet gentler firmament of reality. The rabbi had told a story and Irene and Sharon were also laughing, while Justin, so like his mother with his finely-curved nose and dimpled chin, tittered in the tide of the prevailing merriment. His cheeks, red apples, shone.

Glatstein leaned towards his wife. He scanned the lines of her face, the crevices, grooves, ravines in flesh grown course, old, weary.

“No, Leah!” he appealed with burgeoning urgency. “Put it out of mind. . . His burden shall not be that wish was ours. . . A better world . . . yes . . . a better world than ours waits for him, Leah, for them, for both the children, yes, for both of them.”

Leah nodded, bit her lips, held her eyes fastened to her hands.

"How many miracles," she said, "tell me, how many can the Ribbono Shel Olam still perform?"

Itzchak Glatstein did not answer. He looked up instead at the children. They were happy, carefree was the word, innocent still.

"Preserve!" he murmured, "Preserve!"

As he watched them, lapping them as if to absorb, Irene caught his attention. Smiling broadly, showing her even white teeth, her eyes prancing in their radiant blueness, she waved her fingers at him. Then, wiping her lips with her crimson napkin, she stood up and came towards him. In her red chiffon dress, her pendant and ear-rings of pearl, she was, at thirty-seven, still remarkably handsome. He took her extended hands and drew her towards himself. And as he leant over him to kiss and be kissed in turn, he smelled her perfume and held her tighter.

"Well, Dad," she said as she straightened, her hands still in his. "You must be very proud tonight."

He heard the music, looked once more at the guests, then at Leah, at the children. Once again he tasted his past. He wondered fleetingly whether either past or present were at all real, whether the one were at all continuous with the other.

"Proud?" he said, squeezing Irene's hands and kissing them; then, as Leah had done, looking away, suddenly uncertain, vulnerable, oppressed, "Yes, my precious, yes, yes, a thousand times yes," praying silently for the perpetuation in eternal peace of Leah's miracle.