The Kitchen

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The kitchen in the Pitt Street relief house was the centre in which the most memorable dramas were enacted.

It was there, for instance, that Dora and Benno Elboigen, both survivors of Bialystock, who in private clung to the silence of mutual hatred, emptied themselves of their bitterest grievances and, in shrill exchanges that kept us children from sleeping, threatened separation, divorce and murder.

It was there, too, that Slawa Kopecnik, a refugee from Warsaw, bewailed the emptiness of her life in Australia and it was there that she was saved from suicide by Morris Nussbaum the painter who, coming home early that day, smelled gas issuing into the long gloomy corridor and hurried to the kitchen to discover its source.

And it was there that Arnold Fleischer, a reformed socialist, swept all the crockery off the table with one angry swipe when Victor Kopecnik, a hot-headed unrepentant communist from Lodz, called him a traitor as evil as a kapo. They would certainly have come to blows had not my father, who was affectionately known as 'the Peacemaker of Pitt Street', intervened and, saying quietly that for Jews who had so recently both suffered in the camps of Europe such behaviour was worthy of Cossacks, reconciled them with however grudging a handshake.

tenants gathered around the green-topped table in the kitchen. The words, the rhymes, the cadences were vigorous and musical and I, for one, felt that I was riding on the leaping crests of magnificent verbal waves. But there were few, apart from my parents and perhaps Luba Fleischer who really felt more than polite interest in the painter's verses. No sooner were the readings over than the customary topics of conversation, dispute and rancour were promptly resumed and Morris Nussbaum, biting his lips, sadly gathered up his papers, placed them lovingly into a tattered paper-bag and left the kitchen to return the fruits of his labours to his room. Watching his bent back as he passed through the door, I felt his dejection and pitied him in a childish way.

One day, a Sunday, the Nussbaums invited us to see a house in Drummond Street, a narrow squat grimy white-washed little cottage with a tiny overgrown garden that begged repairs to the spouting, the stonework and the railings of the iron fence.

Standing back on the pavement outside it, Morris Nussbaum asked my parents what they thought of it.

Father, a man of tact, said cautiously, 'Hmm, it's a roof over one's head,' while Mother, intuitively aware that answering a question with a question was the safest of responses, asked with comparable caution, 'Are you thinking of buying it?'

Morris Nussbaum placed an excited hand on my father's shoulder. With the other, he drew his wife towards him. His cheeks glowed, his greying hair glinted white under the sun.

'It's ours already, Itzchak, ours, Miriam,' he said to my parents.

'A dream come true,' added Rebecca Nussbaum, lovingly touching the sagging branch of a withered rose-bush.

Taking a glittering silver key from his pocket, Morris Nussbaum led us inside the house which had been left vacant some weeks before.

The first impression was certainly not a bracing one and Mother sneezed three times.

'A good omen,' Morris Nussbaum said with great delight.

fulfil some special purpose in what remained of God's fragmented world? To the question, he provided his own reply.

On shore, he nurtured yet another dream, one to which he gave vent over honey cake and tea in the kitchen of our Pitt Street house. 'For wanderers like ourselves,' he said, 'living from hand to mouth wherever the goyim were ready to receive us – in Galicia, Sverdlovsk, Tashkent, Ziegenhain, Paris – a home of our own is the nearest blessing to Paradise. In nine months, a year – you will see, you will see . . .'. Counting the specks of paint in his hair as I listened to him, it occurred to me that perhaps they were the days that made up these projected months that Rebecca Nussbaum marked off on the calendar above the stove.

I loved to hear Morris Nussbaum talk. Ever serious, his voice was even and unforced, quite unlike the shrillness of Benno Elboigen in his public quarrels with his wife or as demagogic as Victor Kopecnik's or as cynical as Fleischer's. He brought always a warm homeliness into his conversation and told a story straight, with neither embellishments nor digressions, yet as clear as reality itself. Through him, the kitchen became, for me, peopled with Galicians, rabbis, Uzbeks, peasants, black marketeers and railway guards and sometimes I fancied that I could feel the iciness of a Siberian winter or smell the typhus-ridden corpses in Novosibirsk or taste the golden corn ripening in the Uzbek Spring. Not for him the doctrinaire arguments of Fleischer and Kopecnik nor the acrimonious quarrels of the Elboigens. Like my father, he was a man of peace, a gentle man who in quieter moments would sit at one end of the table hunched with pencil in hand over sheets of blank white paper and write, cross out and re-write in the hold of wrinkle-browed and earnest concentration. Bent over my own homework at the opposite end, I would often raise my eyes and watch him long and steadfastly, watch him with a private delight, because in such moments only I shared in his labours and saw the birth of a new emerging poem.

Sometimes, on a Sunday evening, he read his poems to the

milk chocolate and with little bags of lollies or candy sticks which he bought on his way home from work. Father was not quite as giving, but he did say that after the hunger and deprivation he had seen with his own eyes in the camp at Buchenwald, to deny a child as much as a grain of sugar was to commit a transgression against God Himself.

In that kitchen, too, guests were entertained, mostly recent arrivals like ourselves, Jews from Poland, Galicia and Lithuania who through luck, help and enterprise were already more securely established in their own homes and businesses and were able therefore to ply us less fortunate ones with well-meant advice, suggestions and wisdom. Particularly gifted with a vigorous tongue was Sonia Weisenberg, the Rathdowne Street haberdasher's wife, a doughy fidgety woman with two gold incisors who knew everything and everybody and was bountifully generous with her verbal offerings. Little could escape her hawk-eyed scrutiny, and as for gossip, there were few from Carlton to Fawkner, Victor Kopecnik would say, who could hold a candle to her.

It was she who, telling the story gustily under the bare lamp of the kitchen, provided for us the more elusive details behind the events which later befell Morris Nussbaum, which befell the painter who had saved Slawa Kopecnik from suicide and spoiled us children with his daily apportioning of sweets.

The Nussbaums were Galicianer, though of the more honest breed. With them, when one shook hands, one did not have to count one's fingers afterwards. They were our ship's brethren and of all the tenants in the Pitt Street house were the closest to my parents. Already on the 'Surriento' which brought us from Genoa to Australia, Morris Nussbaum expressed a dream which his introverted wife Rebecca shared with him. God grant him life, he would be a poet in the new land and tell in verse of the sufferings of his people in Europe and carry on, in the distant wilderness of Australia, the tradition of a Yiddish culture that could not be permitted to perish. Why, he asked, had *he* survived when his entire family had been destroyed and his daughter buried in Siberia, if not to

We were five families, immigrants all, biding our time as we accumulated the means to move to more permanent homes and to welcome privacy. The kitchen, situated well towards the back, was the largest room in that house. There, around the table, covered with a horribly-gaudy green tablecloth fraying at the points where it hung over the corners, we ate, talked, argued and joked, while after dinner, when we children – there were three of us – were in bed, our parents played cards, shared their day-to-day experiences, discussed their plans and traded memories of the Europe that had once been and of the camps, the forests and the bunkers where they had, each in his own way, survived. They would spend their evenings under the 100-watt bulb that hung from the flaking pink ceiling by a twisted black cord. On the speckled green Metter's stove in the cooking recess, a kettle, which Victor Kopecnik called their samovar, simmered constantly, while on the mantelpiece above which was blackened by oily soot and eroded by steam, a clock ticked tinnily between a press-iron on its left and a calendar on its right on which dreamy Rebecca Nussbaum marked off the days for reasons of her own. From that same mantelpiece hung a pair of scissors which Benno Elboigen used to cut the children's hair and at the opposite end, a tea-towel or two worn through with use, and forever damp. Under the narrow window was the cracked porcelain sink into which Arnold Fleischer spat thick blobs of phlegm after clearing his throat, and in the corner to its left stood the pantry cupboard with its wire-mesh doors and its newspapered shelves containing an array of biscuit tins, jars of dill cucumbers, jam and peanut butter, as well as sugar, spices, eggs, bread and cereals. We children were not permitted to approach that cupboard without asking, but if Morris Nussbaum or my father happened to be there alone, our chances were better. A gently-spoken tubby childless man with flecks of white paint always to be seen in his greying hair – I was later to learn that a three-year old daughter had died in Siberia during the war – Morris Nussbaum would turn a blind eye to our caprices and would indeed spoil us with small blocks of

The disrepair within exceeded even the neglect without. The colours, the odours, the echoes and the taste of must were oppressive. There was barely a wall or ceiling that was not cracked or flaking and holes gaped in the worn linoleum. In the bathroom, the cistern leaked and thick orange rust had set along the pipes. Every room was dark and airless, the windows smeared or pasted over with newspaper cuttings while the corridor smelled of mice and naphthalene. But the new owners walked through the house with the pride of possession.

'I know it's not a palace,' Morris Nussbaum said, 'but, look, after Siberia, Ziegenhain and Paris, dare a man ask for more?'

When the news of the Nussbaum's new acquisition became known, Victor Kopecnik snorted, 'Bourgeois climbers!' I thought his remark quite unfair as it had been Morris Nussbaum who had saved his wife. The Elboigens, as ever preoccupied with their own ranklings, expressed no opinion while Luba Fleischer the very next day bought for the Nussbaums a shiny aluminium kettle as an early housewarming gift.

The Nussbaums did not move into the Drummond Street house immediately. Nor did we see them in the Pitt Street kitchen as often as before and I, for one, missed Morris Nussbaum sadly. For weeks on end, they spent their every free moment after work and on Saturdays and Sundays mending, plastering, painting and weeding their new home so that they would return only late at night, drink cups of tea through sugar cubes as was their habit and leave early in the morning to resume their labours.

Nonetheless, the dates on the calendar continued to be marked.

When we visited their house once more, Morris Nussbaum had reason to be proud. The cottage had been transformed into a place of light and freshness and showed in every corner and surface and beam the grace of love and meticulous attention. Standing in the centre of their future living room where a mirror above the fireplace reflected their contented, if weary, faces, Nussbaum affectionately and unabashed by our pres-

ence stroked his wife's neck.

'It is ours, Rivke, ours', he said, addressing her. 'After all we have been through, will you let yourself believe?'

And Rebecca Nussbaum, short and round-faced with a scattering of freckles over the broad bridge of her nose looked around into her husband's elated face and could not answer. There were obvious glistening tears teetering in the corners of her earnest chestnut eyes.

The Nussbaums were due to move on a Wednesday. But on the Friday before, Morris Nussbaum returned early from work looking drawn and pale. He had a bruise over one temple and a swollen eye. His movements were awkward and he had about him the smell of beer.

'It is nothing,' he said whenever my mother or his wife expressed concern.

Mother forced him to sit at the kitchen table, poured a teaspoon of vinegar into a pot of cold water and gave Rebecca Nussbaum two hand-towels which she moistened and pressed against the blue-black swellings that looked like bags of ink.

The Elboigens, never ones to buy into other people's troubles, stayed out of sight. Slawa Kopecnik fussed about, chanting 'What can you expect in Australia?', while her husband simply could not rest without declaring that 'only goyim and capitalists ever got drunk' to which Arnold Fleischer banged his fist on the table and called his adversary 'a besotted pig from Hades'. It was once more left to Father to keep them apart while Luba Fleischer, in recommending that Dr. Rosenthal be called, made the most practical suggestion of all.

Mother, agreeing, put on her coat and was about to fetch the doctor. But Morris Nussbaum held her back. 'Look, it's nothing,' he kept repeating. 'The men at work were fooling around. I fell, hit my head. That's all.' He managed a smile. 'I still have my senses.'

As a concession to his wife's plea, Nussbaum stayed in bed over the weekend, emerging from his room only to pass through the kitchen to the toilet which was outside. Once, in passing, he ruffled a hand through my hair and said, 'On

Monday, I will bring you a block of chocolate, so big it will be a feast.'

On Monday, he rose for work, but was already at home sitting listlessly over a cup of cocoa when Rebecca Nussbaum herself returned. He was pressing a palm into his temple and looked at her dully.

'Why on earth didn't you call me at the factory right away? Now maybe you will visit Dr. Rosenthal?'

'For a headache one needs a doctor?'

'Even for an itch one needs a doctor.'

Nussbaum continued to resist. 'Wednesday we are moving. A doctor costs money. And every penny we need. Besides, like I said, it is nothing. A man's not permitted to have a headache?'

Sitting at the kitchen table over my homework, I watched him rise. His brow was puckered and he squinted. His otherwise full shiny cheeks seemed collapsed and dull. He stooped and as he shuffled out of the kitchen, the cuffs of his trousers swept the floor.

'Morris, mine. Please, for me,' I heard Rebecca Nussbaum plead in the corridor.

'Tomorrow,' he said, 'if I still feel like this. Will that make you happy?'

Left alone in the kitchen, I remembered with dismay that he had not brought me the promised block of chocolate.

He vomited that night and again the next morning. Having risen for work once more, he fell while doing up his shoelaces.

Rebecca Nussbaum, appearing in a frenzy at the kitchen door, cried out, 'Itzchak, Miriam, come quickly!'

Not to be denied, I ran along as well.

Rebecca Nussbaum bent over the crumpled heap that was her husband. 'Morris mine,' she wailed, 'my light, my precious'. She supported his head and covered him with kisses. His eyes were open and turned upward; he was grunting with each laboured breath.

'Itzchak!', Mother almost shouted at my father, 'Call a doctor, an ambulance! For God's sake!'

Then an arm began to twitch and then a leg and what had been a grunting became a shrill stridor followed by a sustained jagged snorting as Morris Nussbaum's whole body convulsed violently beneath Rebecca Nussbaum's weight.

An ambulance arrived and took Nussbaum to the hospital. The doctors operated that evening. But the surgeon's bearing as he led Rebecca Nussbaum and my parents who kept her company into a quieter corner of the foyer spoke more eloquently than any of the words he used.

'A haemorrhage into the brain,' he said, speaking with rounded and exaggerated emphasis to make the trio, all newcomers, understand. 'He had no chance. I'm sorry.'

The widow found immediate support on the neck of my father, begging him to tell her that none of it was true.

But the truth would not be denied.

'I am sorry, indeed,' said the surgeon again.

Morris Nussbaum, the painter and poet, was buried the following day, which was Wednesday. As the gathered mourners left the grave, Victor Kopecnik said, 'He always wanted a home, now he has one – for always.' He repeated his remark at the minyan held that evening in the sombre crowded kitchen of the Pitt Street house, thereby sending the widow who was within earshot into further paroxysms of sobbing. The table and chairs had been moved out to make room for the people; a tall candle in a chipped saucer burned on the blackened mantelpiece above the stove; and a rabbi with a homburg and goatee beard intoned the prayers. As Morris Nussbaum had left no heirs or male family, Father recited the Kaddish after him.

It struck me later that that was the first time I had seen my father pray.

It was during the week of shiva that the first tenuous rumours arose. Where they originated, we never learnt, but that Sonia Weisenberg, the haberdasher's wife, gave them wings became quickly apparent.

There had been some tom-foolery at Morris Nussbaum's place of work, a garage which he and two others had been subcontracted to paint. During the lunchbreak, both his

workmates had been drinking. Nussbaum sat apart, eating his customary onion roll with liverwurst and holding his thermos of tea between his knees. There was nothing exceptional in this. Nussbaum, self-conscious about his poor English and his non-Australian customs, had ever been reticient in gentile company and felt that by keeping out of people's hair, he could successfully keep out of their awareness. But on this occasion, the situation took a different turn.

One of the men, a red-headed freckled fellow who was nick-named Curly, was bored. And looking idly about him, at the freshly-painted walls, at the walls left still to be painted, at the sky and at the void, his gaze alighted and settled upon Nussbaum sitting alone.

'Hey, Mort,' he called out, laughing. 'Ya' drinkin' milk, mate?'

Nussbaum smiled, abashed.

Curly's companion, Tom, a stocky broad-shouldered fellow, chipped in. 'Be a man, sport. 'ave a beer. Nothin' better.'

Nussbaum responded once more with a vague reticent smile. Language, custom, sentiments separated him from his 'mates'. He remained in his place but set the thermos down.

'Here,' said Curly, rising and bringing over to Nussbaum a glass brimming over with thick and sticky froth. 'Drink this and be an Aussie. It's on the house.'

Tom rose also and shadowed the leaner, wirier, freckled Curly.

Morris Nussbaum declined.

The men came closer, smiling, pleasantly, broadly, the better to receive their 'Mort' and introduce him to Australian pleasures.

'It don't bite,' said Curly, proffering his arm with the glass.

Countered by another refusal, Curly became dark. 'Mort, don't be such a Jew.'

'Mort' stood up, gingerly, understanding the menace if not quite the reason. Curly and Tom cramped him. Tom giggled, submerging his timidity if not his greater bulk beneath Curly's brazenness.

'Maybe,' Curly said, showing his teeth, 'ya' don't wanna

take a beer out of a goy's hand, eh, mate? Well, here then, catch!'

Curly tossed the glass in Nussbaum's direction. Beer, froth and spray splashed the void, elements of each falling on Nussbaum's cheeks, his overalls, his shoes. In an attempt to catch the glass or to avoid it, he lost his footing, tottered and fell over his thermos and struck his temple, heavily, on the rim of a tin of paint . . .

Without Morris Nussbaum, the kitchen in the Pitt Street house became for me a sadder emptier place, but for everyone else except Rebecca Nussbaum and my parents, it seemed as if nothing untoward had taken place. The Elboigens whom I had come to dislike continued their acrimonious warfare in public; Victor Kopecnik and Arnold Fleischer still wrangled over ideology, the unrepentant communist and reformed socialist ever ready, but for Father, to gouge out each other's eyes in their heat; Slawa Kopecnik as ever emptied out her soul in bewailing the emptiness of life in Australia and Luba Fleischer moved inconspicuously about in the performance of her household chores. Around the gaudy green-topped table, we ate and talked and argued and joked as before and in quieter moments the grown-ups played cards, exchanged memories and discussed their plans. The kettle as ever simmered on the stove and Arnold Fleischer would rise at intervals to spit blobs of phlegm into the sink. Only the calendar on the mantelpiece remained unmarked and there was no-one to read the verses whose musical Yiddish cadences leapt on the crests of magnificent waves.

Sometimes, sitting bowed over my arithmetic or geography homework under the bare bulb hanging from the kitchen ceiling, I would raise my eyes expecting to see Morris Nussbaum opposite me writing and rewriting words on sheets of fresh paper, ready to suffer with him the birth pangs of his blessed verse. But all I saw was a brown flaking wooden chair standing starkly vacant, and beyond, the yellowish grimy wall where a deep ragged crack united opposite corners. And, on impulse, I would tear a page from my exercise book and write,

write words that to me were musical and splendid and exalting, childishly maudlin words that to my awareness sang with the rhythm and lilt of poetic magic. And at such times I was possessed, warmly enveloped by ecstatically sweet sadness and an inner glow that was to recur for many years thereafter whenever I remembered with my own brand of love that saintly gentle ill-fated man.