Our House

I don’t know how my parents acquired our house, but it seemed that they had had it from the time they were married until they left for America many years later.

The house was oblong in shape and one of a duplex. One wall of our house partitioned the duplex and the other faced a side street. The other house of the duplex was owned by Reb Reuben, a widower, who had a fruit and vegetable stall in the market. His only son, Ben Zion, had a horse and carriage. He would drive to the country to buy various produce from the peasants for his father’s business. Often he bought eggs. When I was a little boy Ben Zion would take me along on his trips to the country. Ben Zion later married, and shortly after their first child was born, he left for New York. His father then bought wheat in the market from the peasants and sold it to a bigger wheat dealer. Ben Zion lived in New York for many years before he sent for his wife and child.

Each of the houses in the duplex had four rooms, lengthwise—living room, dining room, kitchen and bedroom. Each of the rooms was fairly large. Originally, the entire duplex was built of lime and straw, and the floors were of earth instead of wood. The walls were white-washed inside and out and on Fridays the floor was smeared with clay. The roof, however, was of “tcherapas”, a form of slate. For a long time my father and Reb Reuben were considering replacing the clay walls with brick. In due course, this was done during the time when my father’s law practice was fairly prosperous. Also, in due course, wooden floors were laid. In our own part of the duplex, the living room floor was of parquet. There was a cellar running under only part of the house. It was not the kind of basement that could be used for anything other than the cooling of milk and the keeping of preserves and similar foodstuffs.

Because of the size of our family, all rooms served many purposes. The living room had a divan in front of which was a longish, oval table on which stood a kerosene lamp with a fancy lampshade. On each side of the table was a chair to match the divan. Around the living room were bookshelves filled with my father’s law books, as well as books on literature, such as novels by Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Gorky and Turgenev, and poetry of Lermentov, Pushkin, and others. There were, of course, also many books in Hebrew and Yiddish. In two corners of the living room were little tables on each of which was also a kerosene lamp with a fancy lampshade. In this room tea was usually served in the later afternoon, with cookies or bread and preserves. In this room also my eldest sister, when she was home from Odessa, entertained visitors who were the intellectuals of the town. They discussed literature and read books and pamphlets which were critical of the Government and which they were forbidden to possess, let alone to read. While they would not have such discussions in the presence of any other member of our family, my presence was no obstacle. In fact, they trusted me to carry such forbidden literature from and to my sister, under my shirt. I was never caught. During nights, this living room was used for sleeping purposes.

The dining room was somewhat larger than the living room and was used by my father as a law office. In addition to the table which my father used as his desk, this room had on the side another and larger table around which those of the children who could write sat and copied from documents originally prepared by father. In any law suit it was necessary to have copies of the petition or other pertinent documents, and since there were no typewriters or carbon paper, copies had to be hand written. Our daily meals were had in this room by the simple process of spreading a tablecloth over the larger table. On another side of this room was a large sofa without a back. On the wall over the sofa was a huge map showing two large circles, representing the globe. From this map my father taught us geography. For nights, my parents had the last room in the house, which was the bedroom, but as the family grew in size they used the dining room, and the bedroom was turned over to the children. The bedroom contained

two large wooden beds, a crib, and sometimes two, for the younger children. The youngest infant always slept nearby my parents’ sofa-bed in the dining room.

The house also had a large attic which was reached from the hall back of the kitchen. In this hall was a ladder standing at an angle leading to an opening in the attic, which was used for storing wood, dishes for Passover, and many other items not immediately needed. Near the kitchen door leading to the hall was a small table on which was a water pitcher, a large pan, a place for soap, brushes and other toilet articles. On the wall over this table was a towel-rack and a mirror. In this hall was also a water barrel, which the water carrier filled from time to time with fresh water from the river, and a partition behind which was an outhouse receptacle for the use of my parents. The children used the streets.

The kitchen was the room most used by my mother and was between the dining room and the bedroom. It contained a built-in oven, several chairs and two large tables to work on, in addition to the small table by the door leading to the hall. At one of these tables the children used to study when father was using the dining room. We had to study quietly because we were never permitted to disturb father at his work.

The house was set back from the street and had a large front yard fenced off with pickets. The center of the fence was a walk leading to a center entrance hall to the duplex. On each side of this center hall was a door leading to each side of the duplex. In the front yard we grew flowers, corn, green onions, cucumbers, lettuce, beans, cabbage and carrots. We had no tomatoes. There were no trees. After Ben Zion left for New York we also used his front yard, giving his wife, Enie (Jennie) as much of the produce as she could use.

In the back of the duplex was a shed. In our part of the shed was the cow, or cows, a place for the “matovini” (beet or bean pulp) and other foods for the cows, barrels for sauerkraut and many other things for which there was no room in the house. In Reb Reuben’s part of the shed were Ben Zion’s horse and carriage and other items usually kept in the shed. They had no cow. This shed, as well as the common attic, was partitioned with boards. This partition had open slats and one could see into the other’s shed or attic.

By David B. Schreiber

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