

## **Eighteen – Chai by Gail Loon Lustig**

Twenty degrees is a comfortable temperature for inside; especially when next to me as I write, I have a window looking out at lofty trees which easily reach the blue, wispy sky.

We've been living in this apartment in Givatayim for twenty-three years. It's the first apartment we owned.

Before this, we were loyal residents of the South African building of apartments not far away which was built in 1981. There we lived, mingling with our neighbours from all over Southern Africa, enjoying the feeling of being instantly understood and accepted by the families.

We had an opera singer, a retired Jewish School Principal, a rabbi, an artist, a few lawyers, a Flamenco dancer, a modern dancer teacher, an expert Shofar blower, a policeman, an anaesthetist whose expertise was making paper flowers, a Manchurian on the 9<sup>th</sup> floor who taught our kids English and was married to Jack who walked outside with a budgie on his shoulder, a ceramic artist who taught the children in the basement, a professor of anthropology, a drama teacher, school friends who discovered one another in Israel and this, just an abbreviated list.

It was pretty clear that despite the benefits of living in a building that resembled a wedding cake (nine floors, the lowest floor had the largest flats while the top floors were for couples), had no blinds shutting out the light like most of the apartments in Israel, purple front doors (the colour the architect insisted on) and a fabulous garden of grass and pawpaw trees planted by a Rhodesian from Rhodos, we were on the lookout for a place of our own. It felt right.

This is what Israelis strived for. Owning your own apartment. Personally, this never really mattered to me since I could not fathom out how owning a bit of the air on the fifth floor, would count as really owning land. It was 'play- play' in my eyes.

After decades of living in the neighbourhood and realizing life could be different, Shamir had an easy time convincing me that we needed to buy our own place. We could just afford it. After all, two doctors with three full-time jobs for so long.

The time had come!

Almost every evening we'd walk around the neighbourhood, mostly drawn to the area where trees lined the streets. How unusual for Israel of the Eighties. I loved the feel of the earth nurturing the aesthetics of our town.

'Here's where I'd like to live,' he'd say pointing to No 18.

'Really? Here? Why, what's so special about it?'

'It's a building from the 70's, only 6 floors, a beautiful garden and set back from the street. What could be nicer? It's my dream, but actually any apartment in this street would be great.'

Having a motor-bike made life far easier finding agents to help in the search. We were just about to sign for an apartment down the street when the owner upped the price by 1000 dollars at the last minute. Shamir cut the transaction right there and then and could not be persuaded to reconsider even when the owner went back on his decision.

Feeling awful, knowing just how disappointed I'd be that he had failed to sign, he stopped by at the local estate agent before coming home.

'Are there any apartments for sale in No 18?' he asked.

'Nope, afraid not; but there is a rented apartment that I've been handling for years for the owner who lives in Canada. Maybe she'd consider selling it? Her mother, an elderly lady, lives in Ramat Gan. She's an English speaker. Maybe your wife could call her?'

Telling me about the first deal falling through, was softened by handing me the phone number to continue the search.

'Hello... Is this Bertha?' I asked gingerly.

'Yes, but could you phone back, I'm in the bath...'

Hmmph, I thought,

Thirty minutes later to the minute I tried again.

'Hi, I hear you're an English speaker.'

'Uh huh, I said..'

'Where are you from?'

'South Africa....'

'Really?? Where from?'

'Cape Town '..

'Really?? What's your family name? I'm also from Cape Town'....

I slipped back onto my chair, consciously relaxed my tense shoulders and smiled. I loved these conversations. I was usually quite good at them.

'Well, my mother was a Cohen. Rita Cohen from the Gardens.. One of four daughters. She and her sisters went to Good Hope School. Her parents were Yetta and Isidor Cohen. Isidor owned the Castle Printing Works in Sir Lowry's Road Cape Town.'

'No!!....'.

'Yes!! '

'Well, how's this for coincidence? Your grandfather did all our printing! We had a small business and used his services. I remember him well! Isidor Cohen!'

'Really?? Amazing! ' I said.

'You know what? If you're Isidor's granddaughter, I'll talk to my daughter in Johannesburg and I'm sure she'll consider selling to you'.

'Ah, she's not in Canada then?'

'No... she got divorced and went back to Johannesburg.'

And that, dear friends, is a true story. One that gets told over and over again, especially by Shamir.

My dear blue-eyed grandfather, who bought me my first piano when I started learning to play the instrument in Bellville and who impressed me always with his determination and perseverance to score at the Jackpot puzzle in the Saturday Cape Times, but never quite did, who had a 'temper' and suddenly died as he left work one day, had been there for me all along. Up in Heaven, looking after his daughter and her children.

Bertha made sure that we purchased our space on the fifth floor. Of course, we renovated the apartment with the help of a South African architect, carpenter and designer. I loved the change and the trees in the street and the two bakeries and fruit-shops, nearby. Speaking Hebrew to all the neighbours seemed easy too. No 18 soon became a perfect place with a special personal meaning.

There, Grandpa, I can see you smiling and your blue eyes twinkling, that at last I've put pen to paper and told our story. I just know that even it may be Shabbat by the time you read this, you'll still nevertheless pick up the phone and wish me a gud Shabbos, mein kind...

Rest in Peace, dear Isidor.

---

**Eighteen – Chai by Gail Loon Lustig**

**Written in January 2024**

**Posted on the CHOL share Your Stories Website in March 2024**

