The New House

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My father brought his young wife to a very old house. Who knows how many generations grew up there, regardless of the winter wind that tore in through the cracks around the windows as if it were the real master of the house.

My mother was too considerate to show how disappointed she was with this place ("the other side of nowhere," she called it). It was the place where I was born, the farming estate "Sukha Gura," which means Dry Mountain. She couldn't get accustomed to the old house or the coarse Jews of the surrounding villages, though she tried not to let my father see how she felt. He realized it without her saying so, but it took almost six years till the new house was begun.

First they felled the oldest oaks in our woods. Our oak grove, the *dubnik,* as the peasants called it, was admittedly thinner because of this, but the house would be much stronger and warmer than a brick house. Oak is as strong as iron, maybe even stronger, they said. It doesn't rot in the wet, it just gets stronger. Even the sheathing for underwater telephone wires was made of oak. The only wood that compares to oak in strength is beech—in strength, but not in durability.

They set up sawhorses in the farmyard and dragged the huge tree trunks onto them and began to cut the beams. The air smelled of sawdust, the bite of fresh-cut wood, and the secret expectation of the great unknown wonder, the new house. The workmen ruled lines in the earth and measured the posts and boards. The man they call Panye Mayster went around all day long with a meter stick in his boot top and a fat pencil behind his ear. He had a piece of wood with a long thin string wound around it. He'd pull a blackened ember out from under the oven,

unwind the string, and rub it on the ember till it was black. Then he would go to the posts and boards, lay the meter stick on them, and flick his fingers against the tightened string. The black marks that remained on the brown wood were the measurements for walls, doors, windows.

Large pots of food had to be cooked for the workers. We had to unyoke the horses from the plow or harrow and go into town to buy longer nails or order window frames and whatnot. It didn't bother me at all that the running of the farm was disturbed, that the fields wouldn't be sown in time this year. All day long I was busy picking up the smoothest bits and chunks of wood. I was looking forward with feverish expectation to what would come out of the lumber that was piling up. And as a matter of fact there was something new every day. The house grew larger, taller. I had huge respect for these uneducated gentile workmen who fit the boards together so that they held even without nails. I was amazed at their calloused hands, so expert at matching posts and boards of different kinds of wood from trees that would never have had anything to do with each other.

I was forever underfoot; I was everywhere. I mustn't miss any of the house building that was going on. My mother lived in constant fear that a board would hit me or an unsecured beam would fall, and she tried to trick me into the house.

Finally, they set up the rafters in the latest kind of triangular framework, and at the very peak of it they put a little pine tree as a sign that the house was finished. The workmen were given glasses of spirits, there was the tossing back of vodka, good wishes in honor of the new house, and immediately they packed up their tools in their sacks, tucked their axes and saws under their arms, and left. And all at once it was quiet and lonely without the hammering and sawing and the yells of "*Podavay!*" ("Hand it to me!"). A little while later, the masons and the carpenters came. They poured a hill of sand mixed with water and lime, which they kneaded and slapped over the walls. But this didn't really have the holiday feeling you get while the house is being built. Until—until one fine day a few young Jewish men came up from the town of Moshtsisk with brushes and pails of paint. They immediately made

themselves at home, whistled, sang, and kidded with the gentile serving girls in a free and easy way. They asked for a lot of milk and mixed it with various colors. They called for milk nearly every half hour, and to this day I'm not sure if they really needed it or just wanted the opportunity to pinch Marishka, who couldn't protect herself while holding a jug full of milk in both hands. Finally the painting began. They held a strip of paper cut in one of various patterns against the wall, ran the brush over it, and when they lifted it, there were colored stripes on the walls, or leaves, or dots of color. Then they laid another strip of paper over the same spot, brushed it with another color, and there were flowers. I was amazed that they were able to fit each strip of paper exactly in the place where it was supposed to be without ever making a mistake. And when they painted the ceiling of the largest room, these singing workers, whom my mother considered a bit too bold, impressed me even more. In the corners of the room, using finer brushes now and without the help of patterned paper, they drew lines of three different colors that looped into the forms of leaves facing in different directions. In the center of the ceiling the form was repeated but larger and spread out like a nest for the ceiling lamp, which for the time being was still packed in its box.

When it came to the oven, made not from brick but from small stones that hold the heat longer, the chief painter, the one who whistled more and joked more than any of them, went up to it, stood looking at it, taking in the size and shape of the slim triangular oven. When he spit decisively, it was clear he knew how to manage my mother's special wish that the oven should be "really remarkable," as if the rest of the house were only an addition to the oven, as if all her thoughts and dreams would warm themselves there.

And once again I didn't step away for a moment. What would come of those red brush strokes?

But no matter how much I begged them to, the painters wouldn't reveal the secret. It was to be a surprise for my mother. Finally, after working half the day, the chief painter wiped his brush on a piece of stiffened linen and proudly called in my mother to contemplate his masterwork. My mother wiped her hands on her apron, looked at it from

one side and the other, went up close, and finally asked, “What exactly is it?” The painter just stood there, downcast and stunned. “What? Don’t you recognize it? Can’t you see that it’s a doe?—which is what you’d expect for a woman who owns an estate.” When you looked closely you could actually see a leaping doe, but my mother still wasn’t pleased. The more passionately the painter defended his artwork, the more quietly and firmly my mother answered. This wasn’t what she had in mind. This was the first time I saw my mother insist on having her way. She was always willing to give way, not wanting to cause pain, and when a worker botched a job, she’d say nothing about it; in fact she would comfort him.

In the end, the painter had to give in and painted out the doe. First the tips of her horns disappeared, then her neck, and soon the doe was just one big brown smudge, as if she were swallowed up by an abyss. I was sad about that, because I’d begun to get used to her. She had already become a friend for me to talk to when no one was there.

This time the painter’s brush didn’t fly so quickly. It paused thoughtfully, stopping from time to time as if resisting a temptation that would lead it astray exactly where it mustn’t go.

When the painter finished his work, everyone without exception was struck by the picture on the oven, and my mother paid the workers more than they’d asked for. On a twig with pink blossoms sat a bird of a kind that we never saw in our region. Its feet held the twig so firmly that you could see the nails on every claw. Its head was thrown back, its beak half open, its neck and yellow breast puffed out, and you not only saw that the bird was singing, you could practically hear the sound that poured out of its straining throat.

The new house was ready. A large kitchen with two windows to the south, a large bedroom with one window to the south, the other to the east, another room set aside for my father’s mother, bubba Chaye. My bubba Chaye had four married daughters, but she lived with her youngest child, her only son. She decided to do her own cooking in the new house, so a separate stove was built for her in her room. Then there was also a room we called the “office,” probably because my father’s bookcase was there, along with a table and chairs. When the tablecloth was removed after eating, my father would sit there and read his Viennese newspapers, *Die Neue Freie Press* and *Neues Wiener Journal.* In the midmorning my father would sit over his books. Often he would write something, and when Volf and Yantsie, the sons of his oldest sister, came up from the village, he would read them what he had written. It was from them I learned years later that my father wrote essays and philosophical studies in Hebrew and German. The manuscripts were tied together and stored in a large chest. I wasn’t fated to read what my father wrote. During the First World War, when my mother fled to Vienna with her three children, the house was robbed, most of our things were taken, and apparently my father’s manuscripts were destroyed.

The office opened onto a small, oblong room with a high window. This little room was called the “entry.” It was to serve as the front hall for guests so they wouldn’t have to enter through the kitchen. In it was a *shrage,* which in our region is what we called an open wardrobe for hanging up outer garments. In addition to the office door and the front door to the house with its four steps, there was a third door off the entry, the door to the largest room with its three windows, the salon, which the servants called “the parlor.” It was never completed. My father, who had been sick for a long time, began to get weaker and weaker. He had long coughing fits and spit the phlegm into a little bottle, which he corked up and kept in his pocket. At first he would travel to his doctor in the city, but now more and more frequently we had to hitch the horses to the buggy to bring Dr. Lebedovitch up to us. So “the parlor” was left to be finished some other year. The windows were already installed, the walls plastered; we only needed to lay the floor and paint the walls.

In the meantime we kept the big mangle there, with three heavy stones on it so that laundry that passed through the two rollers would be flattened by the weight and be that much easier to press. On the walls we hung hitching hoops for wagons, reins, halters, and blinders for horses. And in the middle we placed the newly bought machine for separating milk and cream. It was proud of itself not just for its special appearance but for its foreign-sounding name, “Alpha Separator.” People came from the whole village to look at this wonder. They just couldn’t comprehend

how the machine had the sense to separate the milk from the cream. Like a spoiled rich child, the meager stream of honored cream flowed out of a narrow tube, while the common thin milk, its essence taken from it, gushed out of the larger tube in a rush.

This salon, with its three large windows, one to the north, two to the west, our room for receiving important visitors, was never finished. It came down in the world before it managed to shine, even just once, with a carpet, velvet furniture, and a crystal chandelier.

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