Early one evening, just before supper, a man arrives at our door from the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. In his brown tweed pants and a double-breasted black jacket he looks like an underpaid social worker or a volunteer. He introduces himself in German. Mutti (mommy) stands in the doorway while I keep a polite distance – but close enough to hear. Brown fedora in hand, the man explains that the Goldfarbs, acquaintances from Hannover, have arrived via Portugal a few days earlier and would like to say hello to the only people they know in America. Mutti explains that Papa isn’t home but that he might telephone the HIAS office if he has time. Politely but coolly she asks, “Could you give our regards to Mr. and Mrs. Goldfarb?”

With a large white handkerchief the HIAS man wipes August heat from his face. I wonder if I should offer a glass of water. Mutti, however, is already trying to close the door. Our visitor has his foot on the threshold and begins to describe the Goldfarb’s situation. “Their children have been taken away by the Nazis along with most of their relatives. They have no other contacts in the States.”

Mutti sighs and repeats, “Please give them our regards.” After a small pause she adds, “and our sympathy.” Do I hear a touch of impatience in her voice?

The HIAS man wipes more perspiration and talks a bit more. I want him to sit a while and to drink a little water. Before I develop a strategy for inviting the man into our apartment, I hear the door click shut. He is gone.

American shores are off limits to “enemy aliens” even if those “enemies” are refugees fleeing Hitler’s death camps. Each year a few thousand lucky Jews fill the quota and are welcomed by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, the HIAS – just as we were
just 21 months ago. New arrivals are put up in cheap hotels and provided with transition care. The Goldfarbs apparently made the cut.

By the middle of 1941 we’re almost American. My parents have jobs and I attend school. We’re learning to speak English although we speak only German at home.

Papa tends ovens in a commercial bakery. He is also the janitor of an adjoining four story Manhattan tenement which is owned by the bakery. His official title is “caretaker” but in New York City the janitor is always called the “super,” never superintendent. If something goes wrong a tenant calls the “super.” Sometimes, when I feel mistreated by my parents, I threaten to call the super which causes everyone to laugh and I’m off the hook.

Cleaning hallways and hauling garbage means free rent. After working at his day job, Papa mops steps and passageways. He often helps tenants carry groceries to their apartments and then carries their garbage down on the return trip. The occasional tip means extra money for groceries.

Mutti works in an artificial flower factory by day and is co-janitor after hours – although she prefers the title of “caretaker.” Mutti, who remembers a little of her high school English learned while still in a German high school, takes care of business matters like showing empty apartments and collecting the monthly rent. When needed, she occasionally helps with some cleaning duties – but never with the garbage.

I attend the neighborhood school where I am older than the other children in my class because I started school late. Jewish kids weren’t allowed to attend school after Hitler became Chancellor. I try to make friends – not an easy task for a kid with limited English vocabulary and a funny foreign accent.
Later that evening Mutti and Papa discuss the HIAS visitor while Papa sits at the kitchen table and Mutti fusses near the stove preparing dinner. Her back is to us as she stirs and pours a little and stirs some more.

The kitchen table has a white metallic top with white wooden legs. The top is surrounded by a deep blue stripe on all four sides. I like to listen for the sound of Papa’s wedding ring when he touches the table. Sometimes, at meals, I am scolded because I try to tap out songs on the metal table top. It seems to me that I’m displaying great musical potential. My parents think that my behavior is, “sehr ärgerlich, very annoying.”

Papa and Mutti show their colors as they discuss the HIAS man’s visit. I become an invisible listener. After hearing Mutti’s report, Papa, in his quiet manner, says, “You should have immediately invited the Goldfarbs for dinner.”

Mutti argues, “We can’t afford to feed them.”

Besides, she adds that they are in some way inferior. She doesn’t explain what is inferior about them. Everyone is “inferior” to Mutti. She imagines herself a princess. Even the people who generously sponsored our trip to America, a Jewish physician and his wife, who selected our name from a list of the needy, did not, according to Mutti, do enough. Not even the Gentiles, the righteous Christians who hid my father under their bed when the Gestapo came for him, were good enough to join her for tea. After all, they were only a bricklayer family.

Papa promises, “I’ll only eat a small portion to save money.”

He ignores the “they are inferior” argument but counters. “These people were our friends; they are fellow Jews; they are refugees in need of a landsman, a compatriot.”
I had already learned that Mutti did not always argue consistently. When the “princess” argument doesn’t work she tries a complete turnabout, “The Goldfarbs were wealthy jewelers in Hannover. They wouldn’t be comfortable in our tenement hovel.”

Papa rejoins, “Most Hannovarian Jews were well off. Now we’re all happy to be poor in America rather than in Dachau or Buchenwald.”

Mutti wins most arguments in our household. Papa likes to joke, “I make all the big decisions like when we should go to war. Your mother makes all the other decisions.” This day, however, Papa prevails. With a big sigh (she sighs often) Mutti agrees that Papa can invite the Goldfarbs for dinner. When Papa asks for the HIAS man’s name, Mutti says that she can’t remember.

“Herr Rubinstein,” I pipe in. I was going to add that he looked exhausted and hot and that I wanted to give him water and that I wanted him to sit down for a while and that Mutti didn’t open the door all the way. But I only said, “Herr Rubinstein.”

The next day, during his lunch hour, Papa walks to the phone booth on Second Ave. and 75th Street. He carries four nickels. Each nickel allows three minutes of conversation after which a female voice cuts in with, “Your three minutes are up. Please deposit five cents.” Papa calls the HIAS, tells the receptionist that he cannot speak English very well and asks for Mr. Rubinstein. After a few minutes a German-speaking woman comes to the phone. Papa explains that he wants to invite the Goldfarbs for Sabbath dinner on a Friday evening ten days away. He suggests six o’clock. The friendly voice agrees to arrange the reunion. Papa hangs up and pockets his last nickel.

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The guests arrive – all three of them. Only two were expected. Mutti had already learned from the HIAS man that the Goldfarbs’ adult children had been taken to concentration camps or deported to mysterious places. In her haste to chase the HIAS man away, she had not learned, or had misunderstood that Mr. Goldfarb’s elderly father had escaped with his son and daughter-in-law. The two men are wearing ill-fitting suits with ties. The elder Mr. Goldfarb is bald and stooped over. He seems to be looking at his shoes. His son is tall and thin. His jacket looks as if one day he will grow into it – a line I learned from Papa when he took me on the subway to Delancy Street to buy clothes at wholesale prices from Yiddish speaking merchants. The younger Mr. Goldfarb shakes my hand with long bony fingers. Had I been that sickly when I arrived? Had Papa and Mutti?

Like the others, Mrs. Goldfarb is thin. Yet she has a beautiful bright face highlighted with a touch of lipstick. Her sad eyes look at me with a friendly smile. I feel close to her at once and would have accepted a hug but she offers her hand.

Papa hugs everyone and leads them into the living room. Mutti removes her apron and joins the guests. “We hope we’re not too much trouble,” says Mrs. Goldfarb.

“No at all. We’re delighted to see you again after all this time,” proclaims Mutti as if she’s been rehearsing this line for a week.

Our living room has seating for four, five in a pinch. I sit on the floor and Mutti stands, occasionally rushing out to stir something on the stove. The pink walls are bare except for some cracks which, to me, act as decoration. When I’m at home alone after school, having finished my afternoon roll from the next-door bakery, I occasionally tap on the living room wall to see if I can make the cracks grow or change direction. Once I
tapped hard enough to cause a paint chip to fall from the wall. I threw the pink chip out of the window and felt guilty ever after.

When our guests are settled and chatting, Mutti calls me into the kitchen. She explains that she has prepared for two guests. Three visitors means that there will not be enough food. “When the chicken is passed, say that you don’t want any.” “Kein Huhn,” she repeats. “No chicken!” For an always-hungry, growing eight-year-old, this is a painful command. I try to understand the context. The space in my stomach is in conflict with the empathy I’ve learned from Papa.

After nostalgia about the “good old days” in Hannover, Mutti invites everyone into our kitchen. We crowd around the small metal kitchen table protected with an oil cloth covering. I associate the smell of oil cloth with special meals like the Sabbath dinner. In addition to our four straight-backed wooden chairs, Papa borrowed a folding chair from the bakery office. I am sent next door to hurriedly borrow an additional chair. The table sits four comfortably. Six requires some people sitting shoulder to shoulder. Plates touch one another. Bowls are passed and have to be returned to the stove.

Dinner begins with the customary Sabbath prayers and the blessing for food. We are rich in bread from the bakery where Papa works, so the blessing over bread, “the fruit of the earth,” is a big deal. Although Mutti doesn’t serve the traditional Sabbath challah, the bread twist, we have more than enough of the bakery’s free leftover rolls. We skip the traditional blessing for “the fruit of the vine” because we cannot yet afford Sabbath wine. Instead Papa substitutes the shehecheyanu, a blessing in which he thanks God “for giving us life, for sustaining us and for enabling us to reach this season.”
Finally, the food. Mutti serves me a small piece of potato and some string beans. When the chicken is passed to me I lie that I don’t like chicken. “Nein, Danke,” I say even though the chicken has my favorite gravy. The space in my stomach is winning over my humanity. To help me out of this dilemma, I picture the starving children in Europe who I read about in the Aufbau, the German-Jewish newspaper available in New York City once each week. The starving children are described as skeletons. According to the stories they often receive only one meal of thin soup each day. I remember that not long ago my own diet had been limited – but now there is food on the table and I am hungry.

The table conversation includes statements of gratitude that we are all alive and progresses, with many tears, to prayers for the many who were not with us (and, as it turned out, never will be).

“Wo sind die Kinder,” asks Mrs. Goldfarb. “Where are the children?” Gestapo had taken them away from their lovely Hannover apartment. Along with cousins, uncles and aunts, they were “missing.”

“Wo sind die Kinder?” The question repeats in my head as if in an echo chamber. “Wo sind die Kinder?”

“Here I am,” I want to shout. “Here I am.” But the Goldfarb children are not here at the table. Nor is my cousin Aaltje, six years my junior. Nor are all the other children about whom I read in the Aufbau. But I am at the table.

In Hebrew one says to God, “Hineni,” Here I am. I have recently learned at the synagogue that when God asked Abraham, “Where art thou?” Abraham shouted “Hineni.” And so I mumble to myself, “Hineni.”
Mutti wonders about her sisters and her mother. Where were they? I silently wonder about Papa’s mother. Mutti never worries about her although she, too, is missing. Papa’s mother had lived with us for a while in Hannover. I used to sit on her warm lap and cuddle close. She told me that Papa was the youngest of her three children and he, too, used to sit on her lap. I wonder if I’ll ever see my Oma again.

I have trouble handling all the tears. However, I guess that it would be rude to leave the table. And I’m hoping for more food.

The Goldfarbs express fear about surviving in this new country. “Can one find work as a 50-year-old man? Who wants an old jeweler with no English skills?”

Papa tells hopeful stories about our first year in America. He boasts that Freddie, looking at me with pride, is a good student and exaggerates that I can already speak “almost perfect English.” He adds, “Jewish children are allowed all the privileges of a free education, just like everyone else.”

Papa boasts that at the bakery he has already been given two pay raises and that the boss is grooming him to be foreman just as soon as his English skills improve. “All it takes is hard work,” he says. “Arbeit!” Work! “The bakery next door owns this building and they trust me to be the superintendent. In Germany they took everything away. In America they trust the Jews.” And then, after a pause, Papa adds, “Only in America.”

I look at the sad faces and hear Papa, like the rabbi, preach about hope. I sip my water and then I look at Papa. Surely he will find the right words to bring cheer to the table.

Papa seems to hear my thoughts. He stands up. He raises his water glass. “Let us join in a toast.” Everyone stands. Standing feels good at this moment. In his big baritone
voice Papa proclaims, “We cannot erase the horrors of the past few years. We will always remember. However, now, in America we can look to a bright future. In America there is work for everyone. Above all, in America we are free. Let us drink to Freiheit, to freedom – and let us say, ‘Amen.’” In unison we join in an, “Amen.” We each sip our water as if it were wine. And all is good again.

At the moment I have little interest in the future. Having missed out on the chicken, my concern is with food in the here and now. I keep eyeing the teaspoons on the table. Papa has taught me that if there is no coffee or tea on the table, teaspoons mean dessert. Sure enough, in a glass bowl, a plain, smooth, round bowl with no decoration, a bowl which I had helped Mutti select at Woolworth’s 5-and-10-cent store, the same bowl which had earlier held canned string beans, Mutti brings out canned peaches, the only dessert that I ever remember her serving – other than the occasional canned fruit cocktail with its bright red maraschino cherries. I like playing with the peach slices because they’re slippery and hard to capture on a teaspoon. I liked the bright yellow color and the thick, sweet juice in which they float.

I ready my teaspoon. The guests are served first, then Papa. As I reached for the bowl Mutti snatches it away. “No, no,” she says. “No chicken, no dessert.”