

## 19 Florence Street

'19 Florence Street, Strathfield' they call me. You can see me there on Google Maps, a small red teardrop right at the corner of Florence Street and Albyn Road. Out front, there's a little park they call 'Florence Reserve'. It wasn't always there, but it doesn't bother me. Not that anyone ever asked me what they could build or where.

If they had, I might have preferred to stay as I was – the country home of a wealthy merchant. Of course, in those days Strathfield was still called Redmyre and it was the fashion to name streets after distinguished Britons.

I had two storeys. On the first floor I had a large living room, a library, a study and – at the end of the hallway – a spacious kitchen. It had all the modern conveniences: a wood-fired stove, a sturdy deal table in the centre and a bank of bell-pulls connected to the top floor. When the master, his wife or guests wanted anything, they would ring for it and the butler would carry it upstairs on a silver tray.

The bell-pulls were already out-of-order by the time I was sold, but my new owners had no use for them anyway. They simply wanted the space. And I had plenty. That's why they started using my living room as a function hall and my upstairs bedrooms as classrooms. I was quite happy with the arrangement until I had to suffer the indignity of losing one of my walls. Yes, they knocked down the wall between my two master bedrooms and turned them into a synagogue. A 'shule' they called it, and thus I began to acquire my Yiddish vocabulary. It may surprise you, but walls truly do have ears, and in a short space of time I had also learnt that 'mishpocheh' means 'family' and that life is a bit of a 'shlep'. Mine certainly has been.

My Jewish education continued apace and it was not long before I became familiar with the names of all the festivals. These days, I can't remember them all, but there was always a great to-do before the one they call 'Pesach'. About ten days before it began, my grounds were turned into the venue for a fete. This was a colourful bazaar with stands selling home-made cakes, soft drinks, out-of-season ladies' sunhats, cheap shoes, two-bob watches, second-hand books and lots of 'shmattes' – another of my Yiddish acquisitions. The big

attraction was a tombola run by a moustached barker whose ringing cries brought young and old to purchase a ticket and wait expectantly for the spin of the wheel. I could just hear him from where I stood, but he was always out of my line of sight and I never got to see the prizes.

Yet the important sales were actually taking place indoors. There, in my living room, each family would come to receive its Pesach order. Some would pay for several boxes of Solomon's Matzos, a pound of matzo meal, a bag of coconut macaroons and a jar of runny Kosher-for-Pesach jam. Others would pay a little more for imported Snider's Matzos – from Melbourne – and peanut biscuits. And sometimes an order was collected without money having to change hands. I saw it all.

Later in the year, came the festival they call 'Succot'. This one was also held outdoors and for its purpose they had built a sort of tabernacle on my tennis court. It was a skeletal structure of weathered grey wood. Its shaky uprights and sagging overhead beams were never meant to be permanent, so they said, but once it had been erected, they thought it might as well stay there until the following year.

That following year was followed by another ten following years. Each year the youngsters would come to decorate the Succah before the festival began. I watched them at it. They would have a grand old time poking holes in apples and threading them with lengths of string. Oranges were treated similarly and there was much licking of sticky fingers. One smart young lass had come up with an ingenious method for dealing with bananas and mangoes. She taught the others how to weave the string into a cat's cradle, so that each banana or mango could be deposited in its own little hammock. When all the apples, oranges, bananas and mangoes were ready, the teenagers would climb ladders, throw one end of the string over a crossbeam, pull the string down and tie off with each piece of fruit dangling just above head height. I enjoyed the fun too.

That was, until the Succah was pulled down and they began building the new shule. As usual, they didn't ask my permission. Not that it mattered, because by then there was nothing left to remind me of my tennis court. But I drew some consolation from the fact that this synagogue was designed by a

reputable architect who was already admired for his design of another synagogue on the North Shore. Of course, this was all hearsay as far as I was concerned, but when I saw the foundations laid out in a simple north-south rectangle, I knew at least that it would be a dignified structure. Within three months the builders had disappeared and with them half of my front lawn, as well as the rose bushes that had lined the pathway towards my front door. It was replaced by a wider, austere path that led directly from the street to the double glass doors of the entrance. I was not impressed.

My opinion changed when I began to notice how many people were using it. They would come in droves on Friday evenings and in flocks on festivals. The best times were when dozens of eager teenagers would congregate on my flagstones, waiting for the doors to open for a Saturday night dance. By that hour, the chairs would already have been cleared away and the 'bima' turned into a stage. But those times came to an end too.

It began at a Board meeting, and I overheard it all. Someone, I won't mention his name, suggested installing fixed seating in the synagogue so as to properly separate the menfolk from the womenfolk. The oldtimers objected, pointing out that if fixed seating were installed, the area could no longer be used as a function hall. "No problem," came the rejoinder, "We'll build a separate function hall." "And where would we do that?" it was asked. "Right here!" came the brash reply.

And so it was that the wreckers arrived. I cannot tell you how exactly they went about their work because it was not long before I could neither hear nor see what they were doing. But at least they left my foundation stones in place. Today the 'Memorial Hall' rests on those same stones. So, in a way, you might say that I'm still here. 'Continuity' was a word I often heard during those early years. Which is why I leave it to my successors to take up the story from here.

by Geoff Toister  
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