

Soon after he returned from his trip to St. Louis, as Mom foresaw he would, Pop was notified he had to go into war-essential work - otherwise he faced imprisonment or draft into the armed services. "Present evidence of employment to your local draft board before the 30th instant," Ira helped Pop translate the document into Yiddish for Mom's benefit. The document had come in a large, daunting envelop, and bore the bold black heading: WAR LABOR RESOURCES BOARD. "Below you will find a partial listing of essential work. If you have any questions with regard to whether the work you are presently engaged in is essential to the war effort, inquire at your local draft board in person or by telephone. You are advised to do so at once."

"*Nu*,¹ read. Let us hear what is needful labor," said Pop.

Ira ran his eye over the columns of occupations listed below: "Cons - Construction. That means they build," Ira read aloud and translated. "Dockworker, Farmer, Food Processor, Fisherman, Highway Maintenance, Machinist, Transport Worker (Trainman, Conductor, Motorman, Track Maintenance etc.), Welder - "

"*Vus heist tsetra?*"² asked Mom.

"You don't understand?" Pop said patronizingly. "Ten years in America, and knows nothing!"

"Then you're the clever one," Mom retorted. "Where am I to learn? Over the pots and pans, or among the pushcart peddlers?"

"Then learn now. *Tsetra* means other things," said Pop.

"Can't you say so without making a ceremony of it?"

"*Shah!*"³ Pop stalled her indignation. And to Ira: "Food Prot-zess, what does that mean?"

"Like salami," Ira ventured. "Or all kinds of goyish things to eat. You know: like ketchup in the restaurant."

"Perhaps they defer cooks?" Mom suggested.

"Go," Pop scoffed. "Cooks! They'll defer noodleporters too."

"Then what?"

"I've found a remedy."

"Indeed? So soon?"

"A trolley car conductor. Read again Ira, from that tsetra."

Ira re-read the list of transport workers.

"That would stop their mouths - a trolley car conductor," said Pop.

"Do you know how? What do you know about trolley cars?"

Mom asked.

"What is there to learn? If a thick Irisher can learn, I can learn. They drop a nickel in the glass *pishkeh*.⁴ You grind it to a little tray at the bottom. You pull a cord. You give out a transfer. They'll teach me the other things. I'll go find out where to apply."

"But the streets," Mom reminded. "Such a frightful myriad of streets! You'll have to learn them too. *Gewalt!*"⁵

"The woman gabbles!" Pop dismissed her fears with practiced gesture. "In New York I have nothing to worry about. How did I learn the streets as a milkman? One learns. *Shoyn*.⁶ And I had to drive a horse and wagon through them too."

"That was the East Side," Mom reminded him. "There are - " she clutched her cheek - "Brooklyn, the Bronx, and who knows where else?"

"What? Is it better to moulder in a stockade than to learn a route in - ah! - anywhere: Pitkin Avenue. *Nu*."

So Pop became a trolley car conductor. The route assigned to him could not have been more conveniently located: the Fourth & Madison Avenue line that crossed 119th Street only a block away. His was the "relief shift," as it was called: from midmorning to well into the evening. Reporting for work or returning home, he wore the uniform of the trolley car conductor, navy-blue jacket and visored cap with badge. Ira caught sight of him once or twice - when school let

out - he still attended P. S. 103 on Madison Avenue and 119th Street - saw his father on the rear platform of the passing trolley, cranking coins down the transparent chute into the till below.

All would have gone well. Pop's job met the official criterion that the work be essential. It was essential. But after a while, the constant lurching of the trolley - so he complained, though it may have been his nervous tension - began to affect him. He suffered more and more from diarrhea. Finally it became chronic. Diarrhea on a trolley car! Sometimes his bowel spasms were so severe, he was unable to contain himself until the trolley reached terminal, but had to halt the car en route while he ran into one or another of the lunchrooms along the avenue and relieved himself.

"*Mein urmeh mann*," Mom commiserated, in a way that Pop both welcomed and rebuffed. "My poor husband. Perhaps if you eat only wholesome food, hard-boiled eggs, coffee with scalded milk, such things as prevent diarrhea. Or strong tea with lemon. But best of all, scalded milk with thick skim - that will stem the wild flux."

"How? Where? To keep scalded milk with thick skim in a trolley car? Had you come to St. Louis as I asked, I wouldn't be suffering these pangs. But you refused. So I'm twice a poor man, poor in money, poor in health."

"And what if you had gone to St. Louis and opened a cafeteria and failed, then what? How could you be any better off? A bankrupt, the military would surely have seized you."

"Uh, she has me a bankrupt!"

"No? You become so bewildered in transactions."

"Go whistle," said Pop. "I have brothers there in St. Louis, no? Even if I failed in business, Gabe is a political *makher*:⁷ He would have interceded for me. He wangled a garbage collection inspector's jopp for my brother Sam; he could have found some safe crevice for me to escape the military."

"Who could know things would come to this bitter pass," Mom continued her self-restrained exoneration. "You needed only to send me my allowance, you could have stayed in St. Louis until the Messiah came."

"*Azoi?*⁸ Without a wife? Two separate abodes. I might as well

have landed in the military, stout soldier that I would have made. And a fatherless household. It's clear what you wished."

"To you it's clear," Mom said stonily.

"No? And if I didn't send you your allowance?"

"Then I would accompany Mrs. Shapiro to the synagogue that sends them to homes to wash floors."

"And you think I would live alone? All by myself."

"My paragon. Blessed be the day you found another." Mom's leveled her sarcasm evenly. "Chaim, it was you yourself who chose to be a trolley car conductor."

"Much I could do about it."

"You could have chosen to be a milkman again. Milk all people with children must have."

"Go, you don't know what you're talking about! Milkman. Do you see milk wagons today? Milk wagons with a horse?"

"Milk wagons with a horse! Might I know as much about grief?"

"Aha. Today the milk companies want only drivers who can operate those little hand organs, with a crank in front that you spin, and the whole cart shudders. That's what they want."

"Oh, I thought it was because you had worn out your welcome: with Sheffield and with Borden's and with Levi Dairy." ⁹

"You speak like a fool."

"Then I don't know. *Oy*, it's a dire affliction." Mom swayed from side to side - stopped: "Do you want to hear a panacea? Don't laugh at me."

"I'm in a mood to laugh," Pop retorted with a grim jerk of his head.

"You go past 119th Street every day. One way, the other way. Again and again. Let the *kaddish* ¹⁰ wait for you there. I'll give him a bag with food you can eat. You'll tell us a time - when you pass. He leaves school. He runs home. I have the food ready. He runs to the corner with it."

Pop meditated in harrassed uncertainty.

"Cornmeal mush is also good for this kind of spasm. With a pat of butter on it. Your favorite dish," Mom urged. "I'll have it hot. And on Fridays a little broth in a jar, a bit of boiled fowl in a clean napkin. Ira will wait with it on the corner. He knows where."

"A *shlock auf iss!*"¹¹ Pop snapped furiously. "They and their accursed war. May they be destroyed with it one by one and soon!"

"Amen, *selah,*"¹² said Mom.

So day after day, a few minutes after he came home from school, Ira was dispatched with a brown paper bag containing Pop's mid-afternoon meal. Always Ira waited on the uptown side, because the terminal was only a dozen or so blocks away in uptown Harlem. He stationed himself at the newly opened variety store opposite the gray school building, and waited for Pop's trolley to arrive . . . and waited . . . and invariably day-dreamed. Until suddenly out of the haze of reverie, there was Pop in his blue conductor's uniform leaning out of the rear platform of the trolley, calling irately in Yiddish: "*Dumm-kopf!*"¹³ Bring it here! The smallest task you bungle!" and almost on the point of leaping off the trolley step to fetch the paper bag himself-and probably fetch Ira a blow for his laggardness.

Poor Pop! The home-cooked meals helped at first, but only for a while, and then he relapsed again into chronic diarrhea. It was no use. The cause of his disorder, he maintained, his *shrotchkee*, as he called it (the very sound of the Yiddish word suggested a gastric uproar), was the lurching and jouncing of the trolley car, nothing else; and coffee with scalded milk, and strong tea with lemon, or hard-boiled eggs wouldn't help, and didn't help. The constant motion caused a commotion of his bowels. He cursed the "jopp," he cursed his luck - and time and again, he reminded Mom how much she was to blame for his plight because she refused to move to St. Louis. "Had you granted me a few weeks, abided here a few weeks," he fumed, "till I accumulated enough money to send you passage by train, and have the furniture moved, we would have been reunited as in a new land. What am I saying? For you it would have been better than in a new land. It would have been easier. It's the same land. And a little you've learned . . . True it's a smattering - but a greenhorn you're not any more. You know how to ask: where and how much, and to say yes and no."

"Indeed."

"We would have quit this accursed New York." Pop rubbed his abdomen. "Who would have needed your hard-boiled eggs and scalded milk? Perhaps in time we might have bought our own home in the

ousskirts of the city, as my brothers have, lived decently, with a tree in front, and grass in the yard."

"Another Veljish," said Mom. "My relatives are here. I made my choice. Here I remain."

"You'll pay for my suffering yet," Pop said ominously. "A ruinous choice you've made. You'll see."

"How do these *goyim*¹⁴ stand it, Chaim?" Mom inquired with level gravity.

"Because they're *goyim*," said Pop.

"It's not because they have a skittish stomach?"

"Why should they have a skittish stomach?" Pop echoed her last words. "Did they have to skimp as I did until I saved enough money for your passage to America?"

"Who told you you had to starve? To live on a sweet potato the peddler baked in his street oven, or a boiled ear of corn, or a duck dinner for fifteen cents, and who knows how the duck met his end. So it would have taken another month or two to buy my passage."

"Then I would have had to pay full fare for him," Pop's retort was quick in coming. "Before, you were reasonable when it came to waiting. Why not when I was in St. Louis?"

[...]

And then one evening, long before his shift was up, Pop came home with both eyes blackened, nose bruised, blood still adhering to his nostrils. He had tried to eject a drunken sailor from the trolley car, and been badly beaten, badly enough so that the dispatcher had sent him home.

Mom wept; so did Ira. And Pop too at his malign fate.

"*Oy, gewalt!*" Mom cried out. "What woe is mine! Did you have to wrangle with a drunken sailor?"

"I with him? He attacked me. He wouldn't pay his fare when I told him to. I merely said he would have to get off."

"Then let him be. Let him be slain," Mom lamented. "The war will take its toll of him!"

"It's my jopp," said Pop. "And if there was an inspector aboard the car, I would be fired."

"*Ai*, my poor husband!" Mom clasped her slightly built spouse to her large bosom. "Would I could take your place! Would I were there to defend you. I have shoulders. I have strength!"

"Now you comfort me!" Pop extricated himself from Mom's arms. "I thought with America in the accursed war, it would last two months, three months. When so many men were soldiers, I could easily establish myself in a luncheonette in St. Louis. Or with Gabe's finaigling - I'm his brother - *Ai*, fortune, fortune. Such good fortune betide Woodrow Wilson and his advisers. Gabe said: Have nothing to do with the stinking Democrats. How right he was. How right, how right! Ten days longer I'll suffer there on that *verflukhteh*¹⁵ trolley car - until my black eyes recover - fortunately I took off my glasses when I went to put him off."

"*Oy, gewalt!*" Mom grieved. "I thought so."

"*Nu*, what else?"

"And then?" Mom asked.

"And then let them be destroyed with their jopp. Ten days, two weeks more. The most. I'll sneak to the employment office: not to the union hall full of patriots, but to a plain employment office *goniff*¹⁶. Where is there a jopp for a waiter, I'll ask. They must be in the unheard of thousands."

"And if they come after you? Those who seek the dreft dodgers, dreft dodgers, as one hears on all sides the hue and cry?"

"*Luzn seh mir gehn in d'red.*¹⁷ I'll tell them: Go you there on a trolley car when you have to discharge every half-hour. Let us see what you'll do. I'm like an invalid, no? Cremps. Cremps. Cremps. Like Ira comes home from school and sings. Cremps, tremps, the boyiss march. You want a soldier with cremps in the militaire?"

"Indeed," said Mom. "*Oy*, that they may not seize you!"

"Seize me!" Pop scouted. "It seizes with me. I've already been seized."

"And a general doesn't need a waiter, an officer, a colonel doesn't need a waiter. He doesn't have to be a stalwart, a hero."

"Better a waiter to a general, a colonel, than a trolley car conductor. *Allevai,*"¹⁸ he added fervently after a moment. "Wages they would have to pay me to support my family. Even if they never gave me a tip, it would still be better than spasms on the back of a trolley car, and black eyes." His fingers stroked his discolored cheekbones. "Such an ugly fate."

1 In yiddish nel testa: "Bene."

2 "Cos'è tzetra?"

3 "Silenzio!"

4 Barattolo.

5 "Ahimé!"

6 "Tutto qui."

7 Un armeggione.

8 "Così?"

9 Riferimento a grosse ditte per la distribuzione del latte, con le quali il padre di
Ira si era inutilmente messo in concorrenza.

10 Il figlio maschio.

11 "Che gli venga un accidente!"

12 "Così sia."

13 "Zuccone!"

14 I cristiani.

15 "Maledetti."

16 Ladro.

17 "Che finiscano sotto terra."

18 "Magari!"