

Newspapers on the Kitchen Floor

In the early 1920's, every Friday afternoon when I came home from grade school at P.S.121, I would climb the four stories and enter the kitchen of our apartment at 311 East 101st. Street, between first and second avenues in Manhattan. My first sensation was the delicious smell of chicken cooking and challah baking. It was all done from 'scratch' by my mother. She had gone to the kosher butcher, selected a live chicken and had it ritually slaughtered right there. She plucked the feathers, eviscerated the fowl [sometimes finding unripe eggs which wound up in the chicken soup] and laid out the cut pieces on a drain board after salting them with large grains of kosher salt.

The challah was made from kneaded dough which was formed into 12 inch rolls. These rolls were lined up vertically in a row and joined at the top under a heavy glass. They were then woven alternately until they formed a twisted loaf. The loaf was then basted with egg white, using large feathers from the chicken. Somewhere in the process there was a live fish swimming in the bathtub [I think it was a carp, put there on Thursday]. Mother made it into gefilte fish, which was the first course of the Sabbath dinner on Friday night, red horseradish optional.

Now, about the newspapers on the kitchen floor. In our home it was 'The Morning Journal', a Yiddish daily which my father read. I remember at least four dailies in Yiddish which were on the floors of Jewish kitchens on Friday nights. They were: The Forward [Forvetts], a socialist [Debs] paper, now an English weekly; The Day [Der Tag], I think a middle of the road paper; Freedom [Freiheit], a communist paper; and The Morning Journal [Morgen Journal], a mildly conservative paper.

My mother somehow found time to scrub the floor and carefully lay down the newspapers to keep us from messing up the floor. Before we were to eat, we picked up the newspapers. Our Sabbath dinner was a mildly ritual affair, with my father saying a few short prayers, after which we would savor our mother's cooking, including pickled tomatoes, red peppers and cucumber and other goodies.