

## Room Hunting in Tel Aviv - 1949

Room hunting in Tel Aviv could be quite an entertaining pastime if it weren't such a racking business for the nerves and the body. It is rather like a combination of Drop the Hanky and Blind Man's Buff. In the first instance, the hanky symbolizes the "room to let," and the circle of players the agents. Unfortunately, one is not able to see, where the "hanky" is going to be dropped, and from this point on, the game becomes a sort of Blind Man's Buff, in which the seeker's efforts are devoted to discovering into whose uncompromising hands the much-sought-after token has been deposited.

One of the first things in favor of room hunting is that it enables you to get to learn the city far quicker than if you had a fixed place of abode. Armed with a slip of paper from the agent, more often than not bearing a sketch of how to get wherever you are supposed to be going, you start out on a bus route on which you would never dream of traveling on any other occasion. After getting off a few stops too soon or too late and asking directions of numerous passers-by, who more often than not know even less than you do, never having heard of the street in question, you eventually locate the location you want. Usually the house is numbered, the name on the letter-box, but quite often someone has committed sabotage at the last minute to prevent you actually finding your destination. However, assuming that you do get there safely, to expect to find the people at home is too much. This usually happens when the room in question is reputed to be particularly attractive, remarkably cheap or has some other special attraction. Some people find it frustrating when the *ba'alei habayit* (home owners, plural) are not home. But at this stage it is wise to remember that anyone merely wishing to let a room is not nearly so anxious about the whole business as the person wishing to rent, and therefore there is no reason why they should sit at home waiting for your hopeful ring at the door.

However, we have now reached the second and really entertaining part of the business in hand. Assuming you have arrived safely, found the right house, rung the right bell, and heard the sound of approaching footsteps – you prepare yourself for the big moment. The crucial encounter looms... The door is opened, you smile charmingly (or not, according to your reaction to the person opening the door) and announce that Mr. So-and-so sent you to see the room. What happens next is, I am now convinced, a conditioned reflex – a brief silence, a raising of the eyebrows, the quick appraisal and the assuming of a rather empty expression which does not commit the *ba'al habayit* (home owner, masculine) to anything. Finally, you are told that the room has just been let, is in the process of being let, or that it was let a fortnight ago and the owner doesn't understand why the agent keeps sending people around. Or with a slightly stronger emphasis implying that nothing is going to alter a mind already made up, that they only want a man and why didn't the agent tell you. This information is usually imparted in the hall, but not infrequently you are invited in, to sit down while the death blow to your hopes is administered. You receive the news non-committedly, having heard it all before, and look sorrowfully at the man or woman of the house. They regret...you regret...a shrug of the shoulder...you carefully tear up the slip with the address on the way out and scatter the pieces in the gutter.

There is however one variation on this part of the game. Although you are not greeted enthusiastically (the same conditioned reflex applying), you are invited in to see the room, which is still available. Often the room is charmingly furnished, and an exorbitant price is asked, or it is sparsely and unattractively arranged, with the same exorbitant price asked. Your exclamation to this figure brings on a revelation about the private affairs of the family, and you discover why it is, that these people who would normally not dream of letting rooms, are forced to do so for a few months. The *ba'alat habayit* (home owner, feminine) is a widow with a young child and a mortgage; the mistress of the house wants a new wardrobe, or a

carpet, and there is a mortgage; or simply the owner is contemplating a trip to America (in spite of the mortgage) in which case a year's rent in advance is demanded. If the need of the moment is only a minor thing, you can only have the room for two or three months.

So, having strewn the scraps of your address slip in the street, you go back to the beginning and start all over again. A fresh round of the agencies incidentally involves a technique all of its own. Invariably, an agent's first reply to your enquiry is that he hasn't got a thing. Knowing that this is quite untrue (except in weeks of genuine crises), you maintain silence for a few moments, and then throw in that you are unmarried, have no children, live quietly and respectably, and that you will naturally leave when requested. After further silence, the agent begins to recall that he has something here, another thing there, and all in all, you emerge from the office with new addresses, new slips with directions and new hopes. And so, a bus ride to a new part of town, new people to be met, new flats to be admired and new stories to be heard – the merry-go-round is off again.

Yes, room hunting in Tel Aviv could be quite a fascinating business – if you didn't actually *need* the damned room.