

IN A QUIET STREET

BY THE END of their working day, the Jewish steam-pressers at Levi Hosiery Mills hadn't the strength to stand. Thick scorching smoke billowed relentlessly from the oily black steam presses. The pressers were soaked in perspiration. They worked wearing only their singlets. Ceaselessly, their sweaty bodies stretched the socks over moulds, moving them through two searing metal plates. The presses seemed never to rest, working constantly throughout the day. The presses ripped the heavy moulds right out of the workers' hands, never letting them catch their breath. The steam never let up, getting hotter and thicker as the day moved on. It billowed chimney-like over the pressers' heads, then slowly descended lower and lower. A sticky brown fog covered everything in sight. Presses and pressers were so totally engulfed that they became invisible.

With a troubled heart and a worried glance, Mr Levi the boss frequently looked out of his office window into the pressers' corner. The view from his window allowed him to see into every corner of the factory. He could remain in his deep comfortable armchair that enveloped his small

thin body so completely that he almost seemed to vanish, and still he had a clear view. He only had to raise his eyes to the open window in order to see all that was happening in every nook and cranny of the factory. The sock machines were lined up in straight rows, their elegant heads shining and turning in a rhythmic pattern, hungrily devouring the many different coloured threads in their sharp, spiky teeth. The slim powdered gentile girls wandered around, holding open their scissors that cut the finished socks one after another from their machines. Mr Levi was a small shrunken man, just skin and bones, with a bald head jutting from his narrow angular shoulders. All of his employees, on the other hand, were tall and thin. Their build somehow made him feel more important. Through his office window he liked to watch the tall statuesque girls buzz around the machines. Their white girlish hands fluttered like caged birds in the maze of threads.

The entire factory worked at a rapid rate, the radios emitting a constant loud stream of prattle. The machines roared and shook, as if in a steady hurry. All this belonged to him. They were hurrying for him, for Levi Hosiery Mills.

Whenever his gaze wandered towards the pressers' corner, however, he became more perturbed. The thick smoke hid everything from view; he could see nothing, and imagined that these workers were not working but standing around with their arms folded. How could he trust a Jew? One could enjoy eating *kugl* with another Jew, but that was all! When the war ended, he would get rid of all of them. He did not need a synagogue in his factory. Mr Levi twisted

and turned in his chair. He could not sit still for a moment.

He rose to go to the pressers' corner to check what they were doing. With light swift steps on his short thin legs, with his well-pressed trousers swaying to and fro, he proceeded to the pressers' corner. He suddenly stopped in his tracks. He felt as if all his staff were watching him.

'See the boss going to his friends, to the other Jews.'

He went no further. He raised his eyebrows and looked haughtily over the whole factory. Just then, Jim, his foreman, materialised beside him in a white work coat with two thick red pens tucked above his ears.

'Well Jim, is everything all right?' Mr Levi said, throwing a glance over the whole factory. He turned his bald head to face Jim, who was so tall that Mr Levi only reached his chest.

'All right,' said Jim, shaking his head of pomaded blond hair that glowed like a brass globe.

'Hmm,' said Mr Levi as he glanced sideways in the direction of the pressers.

Jim gave him a playful wink with his laughing blue eyes, immediately understanding the boss's hint, and headed straight for the presses.

'Hurry up, boys!' he shouted into the thick smoke so that Mr Levi could hear.

Shortly after, when Mr Levi had returned to his office, Jim called to them in a softer, more playful tone: 'Hey Jerusalem! Heil Hitler!'

'Anti-Semite! Go to hell!' the pressers replied.

'Blind' Sam despondently shook his head. 'And they

call this a factory. Oh, what a bitter exile!’

He removed his glasses, which were fogging up with steam and wiped them with a dry sock just off the press. In his pale delicate fingers, he held them up to the overhead light and gave a deep groan. He always groaned when he cleaned his glasses. The motion somehow always reminded him of the good life he had had back home. He had been a collector for *Mizrachi*. He had walked about with a leather briefcase under his arm. He had been considered an important person.

‘Samele, do you believe in this country? I tell you, it really is some country,’ said his friend, Charlie the actor, with a mischievous grin. He was a bigwig in the Yiddish theatre that staged performances on occasional Saturday nights at the Carlton hall. Charlie liked to show off his little artistic tricks at work. Screwing up his flat meaty nose and rubbing his hands together gleefully, he breathed new life into the tired pressers.

‘Charlie’s going to start his tricks. We’ll be able to catch our breath for a minute.’

They pointed at Melekh who stood some distance away from them next to a large ironing table, sorting the freshly ironed socks. He worked there all day without uttering a word. They all knew he was constantly thinking about his wife who was caught in Hitler’s Warsaw. They forgot all about him for most of the day. Only at the end of the day, when they could hardly lift their hands because of the weariness that had by now overwhelmed them and they felt they could not see the long work day through, did

they remember Melekh. They turned to look at him and Charlie's eyes lit up with cheer.

'I'll show you something different today. I thought I might play a trick on Melekh, hmm?'

He put down his iron and called out in a woman's voice with a Warsaw accent. 'Mailoooch! Mailoooch!'

Melekh suddenly looked up as if he'd been burnt. He quickly spun around and looked madly into the brown steam. 'Ha?'

'Hee, hee,' Charlie laughed. 'He's dreaming of his little wife in Poland, she must be a beauty, I betcha.'

'What a performance! It was worth buying a ticket for,' said the other pressers, immensely enjoying Charlie's pranks, and even the ever serious Reb Eliah could not suppress a small chuckle and grinned into his grey goatee beard. The pressers called him 'Reb Eliah with the papers' because of the pile of newspapers he always carried. During lunch breaks, he would spread the papers around him and read aloud the latest on the war to his fellow workers in a trembling, disheartened tone. The English words came slowly and painfully. Every few minutes, a broken cry left his lips: '*Oy Gotenyu*, Oh father!'

He would read on, shaking his head every time Hitler's name was mentioned. He looked up at the crowd gathered around him. His eyes would glaze over and he would say with a booming voice, '*Imach shemo vezachro!* May his name and memory be blotted out.'

To which all the pressers answered, 'Amen!'

Tall Melekh remained alone in his corner, also listening

to this news. His eyes never left Reb Eliah, his head constantly moving back and forth, back and forth. Only when Reb Eliah finally finished reading and the pressers returned to their work did Melekh quietly approach him. In a quiet, muffled tone he asked, 'Reb Eliah, is there any news from Warsaw?'

'Why do you ask about Warsaw? Don't you know it's a slaughterhouse, my dear friend? Our Warsaw no longer exists! What news can we get from there now?' said Reb Eliah, spreading out his hands.

Melekh silently lowered his head and returned to his ironing table. Reb Eliah watched him, stroking his goatee beard. He felt a strong pity for the young man and when Charlie and the other pressers made fun of him at his expense, he approached him, affectionately placing his hand on his back. 'They're just a pack of empty-headed clowns, Melekh. Don't take any notice of what they say.'

Melekh murmured something under his breath, turned around and continued pressing the socks that lay waiting for him. His calloused hands flew over the table, moving between the socks. He kept shifting his weight from one foot to the other, remaining standing on one spot for scarcely more than a minute. Everything kept falling out of his hands. He barely managed to complete his day's work when the foreman Jim called out to the workers, 'Right, everyone! Time's up!'

Melekh wasted no time. He quickly threw on his jacket and scurried out of the factory.

Once outside, he stopped for a moment to wipe his

sweat-soaked face with a dirty handkerchief, then hurried on his long legs towards home, not bothering to wait for a tram.

He took no notice of anything that lay before him. He kept bumping into people. As he approached his street, his steps slowed as they became heavier. From a distance he recognised the red-tiled roof of his house. He had been ready for his wife's arrival since the outbreak of the war. But he was still waiting for her, and waiting. He looked at the house from a distance and slowly dragged his feet. He had come close to a standstill.

'Idiot, what are you running for?' he said to himself. 'What are you going to miss? Is there some great reception waiting for you?'

His head hung. He dragged one foot after another down the quiet street. A soft shadow, like a piece of velvet, cut the street into two distinct halves: the light and the dark. The red tiled roofs of the two rows of houses on each side of the street shone as if glazed by the fiery reflection of the sun already setting over the roofline, with just one flaming segment still cooling in the cold low evening sky. The street was restful, even sleepy. It could even have been daybreak. Every house was surrounded by a neatly trimmed sparkling front garden – sleepy houses, the blinds in the front windows drawn. There was not a soul in sight. Melekh's steps resounded on the concrete footpath with a sharp, tinny echo. He approached his house, which looked like an orphan protected by the curved head of brown curly hair brushing lovingly against his veranda.