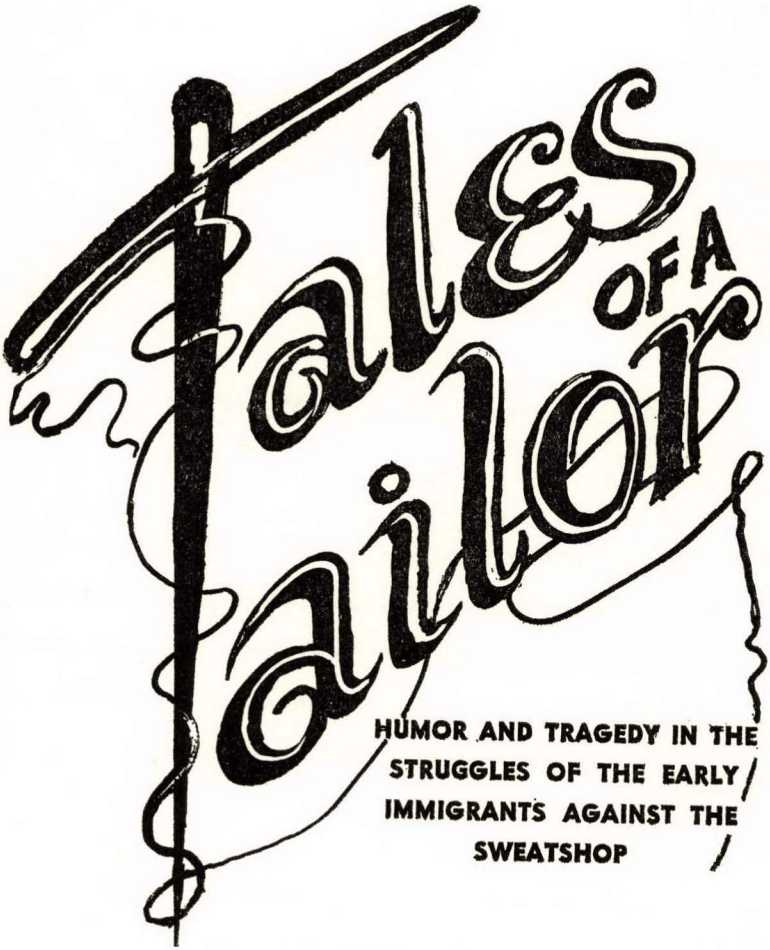


By

SAM LIPTZIN

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In addition to *Tales of a Tailor,* and *In Spite of Tears,*
Sam Liptzin is the author of 28 Volumes of verse
in Yiddish.

autographed

to mr. S. Finkelstein
with compliments
of the author.
Sam Liptzin
1965

IN MEMORY OF MY

FATHER AND MOTHER

and my little hometown, Lipsk,

that was destroyed by the Nazis.

GLOSSARY

Bris	Circumcision
Carrot tsimes	Carrot pudding
Chaleh	White Sabbath bread
Chometz	Food not for Passover use
Gefilte fish	Ground fish cakes
Havdalah	Benediction over a cup of wine at the conclusion of the Sabbath and festivals
Hamentashen	Three-cornered cake for the Purim holiday
Kiddush	Benediction of sanctification of the Sabbath and festival pronounced over a cup of wine
Kishka	Stuffed derma
Kneydlech	Matzo balls
Landsleit	Townsmen
Matzoth	Unleavened bread for Passover use
Matzo farfel	Doughy nut added to soup
Mazel Tov	Good luck
Mezuza	Rolled up piece of parchment containing Deut. VI
Minyan	Ten, the requisite number of males for congregational worship
Mitzva	Good deed
Pupeklech	Gizzards
Schneck	Snotnose
Sefer Torah	Holy Scroll
Shmoneh Esra	Prayer that must be said in a standing position
Shochet	Ritual Slaughterer
Treyf	Non-Kosher
Yom Kippur	Day of Atonement

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PREFACE

THE WORKER in the United States has taken a big step forward during the last half-century, thanks to the trade-union movement. When the younger union members hear the older workers talking about the sweatshops of former years, about the momentous struggles which the workers had to go through, the grave sacrifices which the pioneers of the working class had to make—when they hear all this, they find it simply impossible to believe.

It was this attitude which persuaded me to write down at least a number of episodes, dramatic as well as comic, portraying to some extent the horrible sweatshop of the "olden days" and the general conditions of the immigrants, especially the Jewish needle-trades workers, who succeeded in creating such a large and rich industry in America. And what I tell about the old-time sweatshop, where the men's clothing tailors worked, is a duplicate of the sweatshops in the other clothing trades as well.

Not much better was the situation in the trades where the native Americans worked. It is no exaggeration to say that it was the immigrants who in great measure inspired the American workers to organize themselves into unions and raise the living standards of the masses of the American people.

When, in my mind's eye, I review the tribulations which the workers had to endure in their struggle with the ruling class of this country in order to make the trade

union movement a "citizen" of the United States, I see the faces of the Chicago Haymarket martyrs who were condemned to hang in 1887; I see the fighters Mooney and Billings, Sacco and Vanzetti, Eugene Debs, William Z. Foster and other victims of the trade union struggle. I recall the newspaper headlines with their incitements, first against the Anarchists, the Socialists, the IWW, then the Communists. I remember the scab-agents, the gangsters and spies, the false witnesses, the harsh court sentences, the vile deeds of union betrayers.

It was an extremely difficult and bitter job to build the unions in the "Jewish" trades. The needle trades were located in the most backward, unsanitary shops; and then there was the home-work, the impossibly long hours, the "custom" of dragging your own sewing-machine, your own pressing iron and other tools from one shop to the next.

The terrible exploitation of "hands" by the small contractors, who themselves were exploited by the manufacturers; the crazy system of production — incentive work, piece-work, sub-contracting — all of this resulted even in one worker exploiting another! And not only one worker exploited another, but it was a chain reaction. The foreman had the power to hire and fire a worker whenever it pleased him, and take in whomever he liked. And hiring and firing was the order of the day.

The very same foreman was also a slave to the contractor; the contractor was a slave to the manufacturer; the manufacturer to the buyer and all of them lorded it over the unfortunate immigrant-slaves in the sweatshops.

Thick volumes could be written about the events of that era, and they would be written with the blood and tears which the immigrant workers had to pay as the

price for building one of the important industries in the country.

It is certainly not my intention here to write the "ultimate" history of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers' Union, with its many great achievements in the American labor movement; nor of the positive role of its top leaders, like Sidney Hillman, Joseph Schlossberg, Jacob Potofsky, Frank Rosenblum, Hyman Blumberg, A. Miller and others.

Jewish poets have sung with pain and tears about those days. Writers have made the sweatshop their theme. But how the sweatshop looked from the inside and how the tailor's were hired in the so-called "Pig-Market" at Hester Park, and the types of individual bosses and workers of those days, all these things have seldom been touched upon.

I have tried, therefore, to set out a number of episodes and scenes of those days; scenes which I saw and experienced myself, or which other participants have told me about. If occasionally I change the name of a character, it is only for self-evident reasons.

I hope the reader will forgive me for introducing the personal factor into certain of the events here related. It is not for the purpose of talking about myself, but only to tell the story better, or because I was so deeply involved in it. I have tried to write only about incidents which contain a mixture of serious and humorous aspects.

Most assuredly there are still many things in the trade union movement that need improving. We still have to fight against certain bureaucrats and parasites, against the gangsterism and racketeering which has wormed its way into certain unions. We still need to fight against open-shop bosses and their representatives. Much has yet

to be done to improve the living standards of the workers, to utilize the new inventions for the benefit of the Negro and white workers and for the good of our country.

But for the advances thus far achieved, the workers owe a lot to the struggles of "the old days." May they be an inspiration to the young people to continue the struggle for better and better conditions and greater and greater accomplishments.

And now, in 1964-65, when the 50th jubilee of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers' Union is being celebrated, I wish it many, many more years, to live to see the day, when the wonderful dreams of its idealistic founders—for the future of the working masses—will come true.

Finally, my heartfelt thanks go to all my friends and readers for making this book possible.

SAM LIPTZIN



CHAPTER 1

In the Golden Land

As soon as I received the "ship-ticket" from my relatives in New York, which they had paid for in installments so that I could come to America, I began to say goodbye to the tailors'-table at which I had been working since I was nine years old. The table was my father's legacy to my young mother and her eight children, the youngest of whom had been born on the same day that my father died. The boy was given his father's name.

I said farewell to my town of Lipsk and thought to myself: Who knows whether I will ever set foot again on this soil! But to my mother I made the promise that very soon we would bring all our kin over to America and reunite our divided family.

The "ship-ticket" thus became our liberator—mine and my family's. And although it was still a few weeks before Passover when I left for America, I counted the minutes and the days, as we made the trip across the ocean.

One evening, when the sun had already begun to dip in the waves of the sea, I heard the news that the ship was at New York's shores. The sun seemed to burst into light again, its extinguished rays began to flame before my eyes. In a moment, I would be shaking the hands of my relatives. At last, I would be in the Golden Land!

That night I could not sleep, thinking of the approaching hours. Where would I stay? Where would I eat? What

kind of work would I learn? I knew only that "most of my uncles and cousins were not rich." They had bought the ship-ticket on installments, and the few dollars which my two older sisters—still "greenhorns" themselves—had sent me, had been scraped together out of money they could ill afford. Concerning one member of the family I did have a slight suspicion that he must be a rich man. I got this impression from a letter in which he wrote that he lived on "First Avenue," on the fifth floor. I reasoned that if he were not a rich man he could hardly live on "First Avenue" . . . and the same logic applied to the floors. A poor man, I knew, lives in a cellar, but a man who lives on the fifth floor must certainly be on a higher plane. So that when I had read and reread the letters in which it was explained to me that at first I would be a "boarder" at the home of our lofty relative on the fifth floor, I was completely overjoyed.

In the early hours, with the rising of the morning star, I was up on deck, staring my eyes out at the haze-covered towers. At last, I caught sight of my family, my sisters, uncles, cousins, *landsleit* (fellow townsmen) and friends, who wanted to be the first to hear greetings from home. All of them were dressed up in their holiday clothes. It was the second day of Passover, 1909. On the festival of liberation, I arrived in America with a dream of new, free days. . . .

One of my uncles took me in to live with him. On the way to his home, it was already made clear to me that "First Avenue" was really an old, run-down street. When we began to climb to the fifth floor and my uncle stopped several times to catch his breath, I perceived that to live on the fifth floor you didn't have to be a rich man—just a healthy one with a strong constitution. But when my

aunt began to set the table, question-marks again danced before my eyes. She set before me a plate with an enormous piece of gefillte fish, decorated with carrots, and a separate dish of horseradish on the side. She also put out a bottle of red Passover wine and a whole box of matzos.

I began to eat the fish, but one thought would not leave my head: My uncle could hardly be very poor. And I tried to repeat to myself the American expression which I had already heard over-and-over again on board ship: My uncle was "all right."

As soon as my aunt placed before me a big bowl of soup with *matzo-farfl,* with three giant *kneydlech* floating like divers, I assessed my uncle's wealth to be, if not in the millions, at least in the ten-thousands. Of that I was now certain. And when I was served, right after the soup, a whole quarter of a chicken, a piece of *kishka* with four pancakes browned in goose-fat, and in addition a small dish of sweet-potato with carrot-*tsimes,* I thought to myself again: If my uncle lives here on this dilapidated street it must certainly be because he owns the house. Thereupon I made a silent and reverent wish: "I wish I were already in his position."

At the end of the meal, when the entire family, plus friends and *landsleit,* was invited to sit down for tea, and dishes of nuts and Passover cakes were set on the table, and more egg-matzos in profusion, then I, the greenhorn, sat there red-faced and humiliated. How they had deceived me! How they had tried to make light of my uncle's riches!

I promised myself that as soon as the guests would leave, I would make an attempt to find out, through my cousins, what it was exactly that my uncle did for a living that had made him so rich. Perhaps I could learn the same trade?

All too quickly I discovered that my uncle was a plain and simple presser, but that thanks to the few extra dollars his children brought in for the holidays, especially when guests were coming, he "pinched his cheeks till they were rosy" and put on a show.

In the evening, they took me out to visit a *landsman* (fellow townsman). His home seemed rich and elegant. This time, instead of climbing stairs, we descended them. My *landsman* and his family lived in a basement, in three rooms lit by gaslight. We were greeted very cordially and treated to all kinds of good things to eat.

On the way, I had listened to my family talking about our *landsman*: he was a "janitor," but mostly he lived on "charity." "Such a life," they wished, "should happen only to the Rockefellers.". . . Whereupon a new thought entered my head: Maybe I ought to go into the same line of work as my *landsman?*

Later that evening, when we were visiting another uncle, they finally began to get down to brass tacks about the "greenhorn": What kind of work should he do for a living? Diffidently, as befits a "greenhorn," I ventured the opinion that sewing was not exactly to my liking; that you could not earn enough at it; that I would not make enough to bring my mother and the children over and support them. I had heard, I said, that a cutter earns more. Or perhaps I could learn our *landsman's* trade

All of them broke into a hearty laughter and when they were able to control themselves, one of my uncles tried to explain. "Do you know what your *landsman* does? He's a janitor, a housekeeper, and in order to stay alive he has to accept charity, 'beggar's-bread,' which the well-fed throw to the hungry, and not all the time at that. . . ."

My uncle proceeded with my first lesson": "That's the

Golden Land for you! All year you can starve to death, sleep in the street, get your food out of the garbage-cans, but when the holidays come, especially Pesach, they give the poor a bone to lick on, so they won't stare down the rich man's throat! That's the only reason our *landsman* isn't hungry this week. They're afraid he might eat *chometz,* (food not for Passover, God forbid, so they provide him with *Pesachdiggeh* (Passover) food—meat, fish, eggs, matzo, even wine and nuts!"

I sat deep in thought. My uncle's "millions," my *landsman's* "fortune," all faded away, disintegrated, disappeared. . . . Of the delicious flavor of my uncle's Passover meal, of the cordial reception at my *landsman's,* only an unpleasant after-taste remained. The gold of the Golden Land began to tarnish. . . .

CHAPTER 2

My First Job

DURING Passover week my Uncle Zalman took me to the office of the United Garment Workers' Union and enrolled me in the Tailors' Union, where he himself was a good union-man. On the way home, he introduced me to Hester Park. This was known among the tailors as the "Pig-Market." Here the workers used to come to "hire out their hands." Here the tailors would gather in the hundreds, especially the greenhorns, and wait for the bosses, the contractors, the foremen and the agents, who came looking for workers, and often for "scabs." Thus the nickname "Pig-Market"—it was here the bosses came to search for cheap labor.

"This is where you will come on Saturday, if we're alive and well," my uncle instructed me. "Saturday is the best day to find work."

Early Saturday morning, one of my cousins and I were at the Pig-Market. We had not been there more than a few minutes before a man approached me.

"Hey, greenie, are you a baste-puller?"

"Yes!"

"Could you be a watchman, too?"

"Why not" I answered confidently, not knowing what either trade was.

"All right! Come to this address on Pike Street tomorrow morning." And he took the scissors which I had been given to carry with me, as security that I would show up for work.

Sunday morning I went to Preesdale's shop. A small, dimly-lit room on the fourth floor, where a few workers wandered distractedly among the machines as though they were planning an escape from an insane asylum.

Mr. Preesdale, a nervous little man, whose face was barely visible out of his thickly-grown beard, came over to me and asked me what I wanted. After I explained, he told the foreman to teach me how to "pull out the stitches." Then he asked me:

"And he also told you that you would have to be the watchman till the old one gets well?"

"Yes, he told me."

"Then remember," Mr. Preesdale impressed upon me, "lock the door tonight, start the stove in the morning and light the irons."

At that point, I really began to wonder what the meaning could be of the word "watchman." During the day, I tried to find out; I asked one of the tailors.

"You'll have to sleep here in the shop and see that no thieves break in. Once in a while you'll sweep up the place. And keep it warm. And bring us up beer. And carry out the rags. And take the finished work to the elevator."

I assumed that the tailor was making fun of the young greenhorn. I hoped that when the time came for me to do the work of a "watchman," somebody would show me what to do, just as the foreman had shown me how to be a "baste-puller."

In the evening, the workers gradually disappeared from the shop one by one. (The boss, Mr. Preesdale, had left earlier in the afternoon.) The foreman called out to me from the door as he was leaving: "Close the shutters up tight!" and vanished without even a "good night." Two pressers, who had stayed to work overtime, finished their

work and fled as though the place were on fire. I was left alone in the gloomy shop, frightened out of my wits and not knowing what to do next. I rushed to the door to see if I could catch the pressers and at least ask them what a "watchman" was supposed to do, but all I could see in the corridor was pitch blackness. Terror-stricken, I ran out into the street, leaving the gas burning, the doors and windows wide open and the shutters unlatched.

When I ran breathless into my uncle's house and he told me what a "watchman" was, I began to comprehend what I had accomplished. By that time I was too ashamed even to tell him that I had run away and left everything "unwatched."

In the morning, I hurried back to the shop to see if there was anything I could do to cover up my nice piece of work. I found a few workers already at the door but in the company of a policeman who would not allow them to go in. He was waiting for the boss, he said, with a report that thieves must have broken in during the night, because somebody had called and said all the lights in the place were on and the door wide open. "Nobody goes in till your boss comes!" he insisted.

When Mr. Preesdale arrived and discovered what was going on, his eyes glared out at me from the bearded frame around his face like the gleaming knife of a cutthroat from between the trees of a forest. I flew down the steps with such impetus that when I think about it now I can still feel myself running.

All day I wandered about the streets until I finally worked up the courage to go home. When I walked sheepishly into my uncle's at suppertime, I was greeted with these cheerful words:

"Well, how much are you going to get a week?"

CHAPTER 3

The Tall "Moisheh" and His Fat Wife

AFTER I HAD TRIED out a series of jobs in various shops, a *landsman* took me in to the shop of one "The Tall Moisheh." The shop was really more than just a shop. It was a combination tailor-shop, restaurant, training-school, prison, and—insane asylum. The place was on Mangin Street, on the third floor. It was a sweatshop like most of the other sweatshops of that time.

The Tall Moisheh was a Hungarian Jew with a big brown beard. When he was in the shop he always wore a dressing-gown. Above his long, bony hands you could see the cuffs of his shirt. A little further —the sleeves of a sweater. Still a little further—the sleeves of a jacket. The sleeves of his dressing-gown never reached further than his elbows.

He appeared in the shop only when he brought the pushcart with the bundles of work. Then he used to march into the building in great tumult, as though he were in the process of rescuing humanity from a terrible catastrophe. Simultaneously, he would issue the order to the green apprentice-boys, of whom I was one, to take the bundles up to the third floor. There was no elevator.

The Tall Moisheh's wife, Gutkeh, was always in the shop. She was the forelady, the manager, the bookkeeper and the boss. She used to distribute the pay-envelopes, an event which took place every Tuesday. She would pay us in single dollar bills to the following refrain: "See what a

mountain of money you take away from us, you greenhorns!" (My pay was all of eight dollars a week.) Her vocabulary would have made even a burlesque-comedian blush. The workers used to call her Gypsy. Why, I don't know. Perhaps it was because she was constantly in a state of decolletage.

In addition to her managerial activities in the "manufacturing" end of the business, which she knew very well, there were also her culinary activities. She used to cook all her meals right in the shop. And she cooked not only for herself but for the watchman of the building, for several Hungarian *landsleit,* for a couple of apprentice-boys, and for any worker who wanted a hot meal instead of a cold sandwich for supper. Because you must understand that after supper we had to go back to work again. The boss, The Tall Moisheh, used to "fit out" the work in the evening, so that during the day he could devote all his time to the market.

In one of the three rooms of the shop stood a large oven which was always red-hot. This was used not only for cooking Gutkeh's meals, but for heating the pressers' irons. Gas or electricity was unheard of in a shop like this one. Even the sewing-machines were an exhibit of primitive industrial inventions. At The Tall Moisheh's you could still find machines with foot-power, treadles, bicycle-pedals, etc.

My job was to stitch the "under-collars" to the canvas. Naturally, I myself had to press the seam. One day, going into the kitchen to get the heavy iron, I knocked over one of the pots. Everything in it was spilled onto the oven. The steam shot out into the room and Gutkeh came running. When she saw what I had done, she grabbed a soup-ladle and hit me over the head. At that moment, I almost

raised the hot iron and pushed it against her bare bosom. But just in time I remembered that back in the old country I had a mother and seven brothers and sisters who were waiting for me to bring them to America.

A few hours later, we heard a great commotion in the kitchen. Gypsy had burst into loud screaming mixed with a torrent of deadly curses. We all ran into the room. What had happened?

"Some no-good lowlife threw chalk into my soup!" she screamed.

It was true. Someone had put pieces of tailor's marking-chalk into a pot of soup. The chalk, made of a kind of fat, was bubbling in her soup and creating an awful stench. Nobody knew who had committed the crime.

Moisheh was then out of the shop "on business." When he returned, and had been apprised of the situation, he came over to me and said nervously:

"Gutkeh says you threw chalk into her soup. Gutkeh says you made all her pots *treyf* (not Kosher) with that chalk. Gutkeh says I should fire you." Then he lifted my chair right out from under me and I stood up, confused and embarrassed.

For me, that day was *Yom Kippur.*

Sorrowfully, I left the shop and headed straight for Hester Park and the Pig-Market.

On the Tuesday after I had been fired, I went back to Moisheh the Long's to collect my pay. I found all the workers standing around mournful, as though it were a day of mourning. It seems that on Monday, Gutkeh the Gypsy had taken the money which was to have been paid out to the workers on Tuesday and had run away with the watchman!

The Tall Moisheh paced back and forth and kept asking



A Shop at Home

one question: "How could my *landsman,* the watchman, run away in the middle of everything and leave the big oven unattended? It could have started the biggest fire!"

Twenty-six years later, in 1936, I went to work in a dress factory in Los Angeles. The boss of the shop, an elderly woman, worked at a table near me along with a tall operator. Whenever I could do so, without them noticing it, I examined their features intently and time and again I kept telling myself that I must know them from somewhere.

One day after lunch, I came back into the shop and sat down at my machine. The boss and the operator were sitting nearby eating their lunches. Offhandedly she remarked that she had been in America over 40 years and had never eaten her lunch anywhere but in a shop.

"Once I had a shop in New York where I even used to cook my meals. I remember one day," she laughed, "somebody threw chalk into my soup and made every pot in my kitchen *treyf!*"

Of course, I burst out laughing myself. At that point, we recognized each other and began to reminisce. We went over the whole story and I steadfastly maintained my innocence.

"Not only that," I reminded her, "but you still owe me eight dollars pay for that week when you ran away with the . . ." Here I could not go on, and sat there rather sheepishly with my mouth open. The tall operator was undoubtedly her husband. What had happened with the watchman?

Little by little the story came out. She had loved her husband, but not his beard. She had run away with the watchman in order to force her husband to shave off his beard. She had won her point and there had been a recon-

ciliation. But instead of making men's clothing in a sweatshop in New York, they were now exploiting dressmakers in a sweatshop in Los Angeles.

CHAPTER 4

"Benjamin Cholerya" (Cholera)

AMONG THE HUNDREDS of sweatshops which multiplied in New York like mosquitoes in a swamp, there was one on Cannon Street which belonged to a boss whom everybody called "Benjamin Cholerya." He must have weighed all of a hundred pounds, but his mouth was as big as a railroad station.

They called him Benjamin Cholerya because his big mouth never closed. He swore at everything, good or bad. For instance, he was afraid to curse the designer who worked for him. So he cursed himself. When we heard his shouts through the shop: "May I burn like a cigar if this pattern doesn't come out right!" then we knew that the designer had come to work.

All day long he swore at the workers. Was the sleeve sewed in crooked? Then he cursed the operator: "May your guts be as crooked as that sleeve!" Did someone ask him for a needle? Then he dispensed the needle and added a bonus: "Here's the damn needle and stick yourself with it!" Summertime he would yell: "Open a window, may a sore open up on you!" Wintertime he would scream: "Shut the window, may you need an ice-bag on your head!"

Like a demon he would leap from table to machine, from machine to presser, grabbing up the work and swearing at nothing in particular: "Finished? May I see the finish of all of you!"

Often he would dart into the washroom, and if he caught anyone smoking, would go almost into hysteria. He himself carried a lit cigar in his mouth most of the day, but at workers he would scream: "You won't burn *my* shop down, may a fire burn your guts out!"

His favorite target was Hershl Chekhotnik (consumptive). Hershl was a sickly man. In those days it was not unusual for a worker to sit at his machine with tubercular lungs and almost choke to death. Hershl tried to hide his illness by smothering his crowing cough. His face would grow a fiery red. He would try to hide his face in the piles of clothing, which only made his cough worse.

And Benjamin Cholerya had extra-keen ears. As soon as he would hear Hershl's cough, his oath would come hurtling across the room "Finish your damn coughing and don't let the machine run for nothing, you corpse, you!"

One day, the examiner found a bloodstain on a light-colored coat. The shop went topsy-turvy. The Cholerya began to swear at everything in sight, but especially at Hershl. Hershl paled, frightened half to death. His hands shook. The more the workers stared at Hershl, the louder grew Benjamin's bellowing. He strode through the shop like an unleashed tiger, circling closer and closer toward Hershl; then seemed to leap upon him: "I'm taking twelve dollars out of your pay, you hear me, Chekhotnik? You can spit all the blood you want, Chekhotnik, but not on my coats!"

The other workers sat dumbfounded, insulted, humiliated, helpless.

I had an idea. I whispered to the head operator that maybe we ought to run a raffle and raise the twelve dollars and get Hershl out of the fix. He agreed and presented the idea to the workers, who also agreed. A committee of

three later approached Benjamin Cholerya to get his approval. He approved. But with one condition. Instead of twelve dollars, it should be eighteen. He had just remembered that recently a piece of lining, had disappeared from the shop. Now he wanted to get paid for it, or else he would throw that damn Chekhotnik out in the street.

The workers raised the eighteen dollars and raffled off a suit and saved Hershl's job. But Hershl never came back to work. For a long time he lay sick at home. Then a charity organization sent him somewhere for a cure.

In 1927, I was on a speaking tour and I stopped in Denver, Colorado, to visit a friend at a sanatorium. Walking through the rooms, a living corpse stopped me at his bedside and asked me if I had ever worked at Benjamin Cholerya's. I did not recognize him. The mask of death already lay upon his face.

As soon as we began to talk about the old times, his face grew more animated and he asked question after question about New York. Of course, he asked about the old shop: "Is Benjamin Cholerya still among the living? Is he still in the same business?"

"May the cholera know as much about him as I do!" I replied smilingly and his thin, dry lips smiled back at me weakly.

When I walked out of that sanatorium, a bloodspot on a light coat swam before my eyes like a great stain of shame upon human society.

CHAPTER 5

Zelig, The "Usurer," and His "Lunch Business"

ON THE PIG-MARKET, which 50 years ago was the "Employment Center" for garment workers in New York City, you could always find hundreds of workers, most of them new immigrants. Various crooks and swindlers used to operate among these "greenhorns," whom they considered "easy pickings." Some of them dealt in tailors' tools —scissors, machine-bases, tape-measures, gauges, needles, pulleys. Others cashed checks, loaned money on interest, sold ship-tickets on installments.

One day there was a sudden, exceptional demand for workers on the Pig-Market. An American young man, who represented himself as a foreman in one of the shops, came into the Market and announced that he needed a lot of workers. To each "applicant" he gave the name and address of a different shop and told him to report there for work. From each worker he took a "small deposit"—a pair of scissors, or a sewing-machine base, or even a couple of dollars cash. He thus swindled about 50 workers, including me. My contribution was a new pair of scissors, which I had just bought in preparation to looking for a job as an apprentice pocket-maker. The name of the shop he told me to report to was Cohen, Glassman & Schreiber, on Allen Street.

On Monday morning, when I arrived at the shop, I found a collection of more victims like me.

As we stood around commiserating with each other, one

of the operators told us a story: "Our present swindler was a piker compared to the one I ran into once. He told me to go on a job at a certain shop and to bring my own machine. He said he would meet me at a certain corner and help me carry the Singer to the shop. Well, he met me and he helped me carry it. I carried it for a block and then *he* carried it for a block. But on the way, while *he* was carrying the machine, a passerby stopped me with a piece of paper in his hand and asked me if I would please tell him how to get to a certain address. When I had finished giving him directions, I saw that my 'helper' and my machine had both disappeared. . . ."

His story hardly cheered us up.

As luck would have it, it turned out that Cohen, Glassman & Schreiber actually were in need of apprentice pocket-makers. Since I was already there, I climbed up to their shop on the fifth floor to ask for a job.

Immediately inside their door, I was greeted by a chunky little man who identified himself as the foreman. With a cynical half-smile he asked: "Can you help out on the machine? Can you thread a needle? If so, sit down here and go to work!" He even gave me a pair of scissors to work with.

The shop was dark and dirty, its windows covered with layers of dust, like old dirty mattresses in dark frames. The buckets of water which stood near the door, in compliance with the regulations of the fire department, stank of dirt and slop. Pieces of bread and chicken-bones lay in heaps around the machines, where the workers used to eat their meals. Eating lunch in a restaurant was unheard of in those days. There was no such thing as a lunch-hour. The workers knew it was time to eat when the peddler came into the shop with his basket of food.

In the peddler's basket you could find a slice of bread, a roll, a *"Byaly,"* a bagel—each for a penny. For two cents, you could get a piece of herring, a piece of wurst, a bottle of soda. For three cents—a drink of schnaaps, a tomato-herring, a piece of cheese. For "dessert," there were apples, bananas, plums. For nine cents you could put together a "meal."

You placed the food near your machine or on the machine itself. You did not stop working while you were eating, but took your bites between stitches. . . .

The peddler who used to come into this particular shop was called "Zelig the Usurer." The funny thing about this name was that it meant just the opposite of what you would think. He was called that, not because he charged other people interest but because *he* paid interest. For instance: His pocket-watch he had bought to be paid for later. Similarly with the 'ship-ticket" for his wife's passage to America. But there was something else. The workers used to buy his goods from him on "chalk"—on credit, that is. He would write our debts on the wall with white chalk. Often it was impossible to read what he had writen. Then Zelig would say: "Please, pay me cash and take off your interest!"

But no one ever paid him cash. And the reason was not that we didn't have the money. It was simply that there was no time to stop working and settle accounts with him. Besides, we were paid every two weeks, often with post-dated checks (which we called "ahead-checks"), and Zelig used to cash the checks for us in order to get his money.

So every day, Zelig would chalk his figures on the dirty wall of the shop. An then the great misfortune occurred. It was around Passover, and the shop was not working. A sudden urge took possession of the bosses to whitewash the walls. When we returned to work after the holiday, the

very air seemed cleaner and brighter. We were delighted. Night had turned into day.

But at twelve o'clock, when Zelig came in and took one look at the whitewashed walls, the basket of food fell out of his hands. He himself stretched out on the floor in a dead faint. When he came to, we heard him muttering: "They've ruined me . . . they've ruined me . . . with one smear of the brush they wiped out everything I own. . . ."

The whitewash had erased Zelig's bookkeeping and all our debts.

Like a despairing bankrupt, Zelig went pleadingly from worker to worker, trying to make a settlement with each one for at least a percentage of what was owed him, so that he could end up with some cash to cover the catastrophe which had devastated him.

Thus did the bit of light and cleanliness which had brightened our existence, make the life of Zelig darker than ever. . . .

CHAPTER 6

The Accident

THIS WAS IN THE DAYS when the United Garment Workers' Union controlled several so-called union-shops in New York. These shops were known as "label-shops," because their union conditions consisted only in that the garments made there had United Garment Workers' union-labels sewn into them.

Ninety-nine percent of the trade was then working under the most terrible conditions. The sweatshops were blooming in the dirt. Everything was on piece-work or quotas. They made use of home-work, contractors, subcontractors, section-work. The workers worked in "teams" which consisted of a group of learners and apprentices under a "leader." The motto was: "There's no shortage of gas and thread!" or "When the clock gets to Twelve, it starts over again with One!" Seven days a week and twelve-fourteen hours a day was "normal."

All week long my alarm-clock would wake me every morning at six. On Saturdays, however, our alarm-clock would have a day of rest. My pious mother, who had just arrived in America with her children, refused to have the clock ring on the Sabbath. But she knew too that if I didn't get to work on Saturday, I would lose my job. So, since necessity has always been the mother of invention, *my* mother invented a Sabbath alarm-clock. Every Saturday morning at six, she would wake up, come into my room

and toss a shirt or pair of socks on my bed. "Here's a shirt for you!" she would say once or twice, depending on how soundly I was sleeping. Whereupon I would get up and go to work.

At that time, I was working for Greenberg & Goldstein, on Jackson Street. In this shop we were on the "quota system." It worked this way: A group of workers, a sort of "corporation," had to turn out daily, let us say, 15 coats. The groups worked together as "partners" and had several apprentices and helpers. The partners were an operator, a presser, a baster, a finisher and a fitter. Each one had to do his share of the work on the garment. Naturally, each group was made up of people who were equally facile and efficient, so that the work would not be held up by any bottlenecks.

It happened, however, that one of the operators, Freedman, after years of working for Greenberg & Goldstein, suddenly put on a lot of weight; he actually got so fat that he couldn't run his machine at the required speed. The fellows in his group thereupon gave him the nickname: "Schmaltz-herring."

His co-workers did not want to put him out of their "set" in the middle of the season, because he was a very good sleeve-setter, a "specialist" in his trade. But Freedman himself was heartsick over his inability to keep up with the rest. He didn't mind the longer hours he had to put in; what worried him was making the others wait. The presser used to tease him unmercifully: "Schmaltz-herring, shake your potbelly and get a move on!"

So Freedman began to come in to the shop a couple of hours earlier and leave a couple of hours later than the others. Now, the building had a watchman who used to sleep on the premises. Freedman, coming in at four

o'clock in the morning, would bang on the the door until he woke up the watchman. After a few weeks of this, the watchman objected to having his sleep broken every morning at four o'clock and refused to open the door.

Freedman, persistent, discovered a way to get in. Next to the shop there was an apartment house, also five stories high. Between the two buildings there was a narrow skylight. Every morning, Freedman would climb the stairs of the apartment house to the roof. Across the two roofs he laid an old wooden door and using this as a gangway, he would make his way across the skylight and onto the fire-escape of the shop. There he would push open a window and go to work so he could have something ready for his group.

One morning, when the workers of his set came into the shop they were surprised to find Freedman absent from his machine. The presser began his usual recital of insults. "Today I'm going to tear open that schmaltz-herring and pickle him in vinegar!"

An hour or two passed and still Freedman had not showed up. The boss, Greenberg, became fearful lest the workers of the set go out looking for another sleeve-setter to replace Freedman . . . or they might leave his establishment altogether. So he pulled a deck of cards out of a drawer and put them on the table. "Let's play a pinochle while we're waiting!"

About ten o'clock we heard a commotion in the street. The first thing we thought of in those days was a fire, so we all ran out to see what was burning. But there was no fire. There was a group of frightened and excited children with a horrible story that was clear to all of us as soon as we heard their first words. They had gone to play in the yard between the buildings. They had stumbled

over some glasses and broken boards and the dead body of a very heavy man.

Two days later, a new sleeve-setter sat at Freedman's machine. He was a thin, rather shrunken-looking man. The presser immediately gave him a nickname: "The dried-up herring."

"Hey, you dried-up herring, move your feet a little faster on that treadle—we're waiting for you!"

CHAPTER 7

He Lost His Pants

IN THE SWEATSHOPS of the old days, we never knew when the day began and when it ended. We also did not know when there would be work and when there wouldn't. The boss, however, knew that he wanted to have the set ready for work every day. Besides, he was afraid that a good operator might run down to the Pig-Market and make connections with another set. That's why the habit of cardplaying became so imbedded in the shops and has lasted until today, even when we have such strong unions.

The moment an operator would finish his part of the process, the boss or foreman would see to it that a "game" got under way. The boss himself would take a hand in order to keep the game going until someone else in one of the sets had finished.

At Goldstein & Fedder's shop on Cherry Street there was a game going constantly, so that even workers from other shops in the building used to come in when they were free to take a hand. Mr. Fedder himself would take a deal occasionally, between trips to and from his "office." The office was in a corner beneath the staircase and consisted of a chair and a table with some scraps of paper on it. During the heat of the game he would always encourage the losers to stay in; he even staked them when they ran out of money. The stake, of course, was "on account"—on account, that is, of future "pay days." The workers used to call this: "Mortgaging the season."

In addition to the money which the cardplayers would often borrow from the boss, there were also the loans from the peddler, from the watchman, and from one another. The worse the shop was, the larger the "accounts" were. Some of the workers got to be "regular bankers," keeping their accounts straight.

Among the workers at Goldstein & Fedder there was a finisher known as "Moisheleh Soldat" (Soldier). This Moisheleh Soldat became such a passionate cardplayer that he lost every free minute of his time and often every cent of his earnings. His only real property was his shears. Once he bet these and lost. The boss, who had refused to lend him any more money, nevertheless had to ransom the shears so that Moisheleh could go back to work.

Goldstein & Fedder would receive an order for several dozen garments. The "set" would put in its two weeks and "knock out the work." Then they could barely wait till Tuesday, when the boss would hand out the "ahead-checks," so they could go to the grocers' and borrow again.

Moisheleh Soldat used to wait for pay day more anxiously than anyone else. One lucky Tuesday, Moisheleh got his "ahead-check" from which the boss had first of all deducted the half that Moisheleh owed him. The other half was owed to the peddler and several of the other men. But Moisheleh announced that this week he wasn't paying any debts. He owed his rent, he needed shoes, and most important of all, he had to buy himself a pair of pants.

But Mr. Fedder also had an announcement to make. He was organizing a game, a "big one." He took the opportunity to needle Moisheleh. "Why only shoes and pants. Take a hand, and with God's help, you'll buy yourself a whole suit!" Mr. Fedder was very persuasive. He cashed

Moisheleh's check and together with a few others they sat down to a "little poker."

Hour after hour passed and Moisheleh's sixteen dollars vanished, leaving him without a cent and in debt again. Fedder was not above a little gentle kibbitzing. "I thought Moisheleh Soldat would win enough for a whole suit—and look, he even lost his pants!"

The next day, the conversation around the work-table, as usual, was about yesterday's game, in all its details. Various hands were reenacted, complete with dialogue. "You never should have raised him! . . . He bluffed you out good, you sucker! . . . You waited too long to throw your cards in—ai, what a player!" But Moisheleh Soldat was silent and mournful, like someone grieving over his lost sweetheart.

The day's work was finally completed. In the afternoon, Messrs. Goldstein & Fedder promised that we would work no later than six o'clock that night, because their "Society" was running a benefit at the Thalia Theater. They were "big *machers*" (big shots) in the organization and had sold tickets to many of the workers in the shop.

Mr. Goldstein went home early to pick up his wife. Mr. Fedder, on the other hand, stayed in the shop because his wife was calling for him.

I was working then as a "matcher" and ticket-sewer and was therefore usually the last one to leave. As I stood engrossed in my duties, the door flew open and a fiery woman burst into the room waving a stick and yelling:

"Where is he, that crook!"

Not knowing what she wanted, or whom she was after, and scared out of my wits by the club she was brandishing, I pointed to the office where Mr. Fedder sat waiting for

his wife. The woman tore open the door and began to beat poor Mr. Fedder over the head.

"You thief! You murderer! Stealing my husband's pay and the bread out of my children's mouths! Give me back his check or we'll all go to your funeral tomorrow! I'm going to find your wife and tell her everything!"

In the midst of all this commotion, Mrs. Fedder came into the shop. Hearing the accusations of another woman upon her husband, she asked no questions, drew her own conclusions, ran into the office, slapped her husband twice and began to scream at Moisheleh's wife:

"You slut! Just because you've got a jerk for a husband, you have to come messing around with mine?"

Moisheleh's wife took a firmer grip on her club and went to work on Mrs. Fedder. "Break your bones! Just because you have a cardsharp for a husband, who steals the bread out of the mouths of his workers' children, you have to call me a slut?"

By this time all three of them were tangled up in a knot of flailing arms. I dashed out into the corridor and yelled for help. People ran down from the other floors and pried the combatants apart. The blood was flowing freely.

Moisheleh's wife insisted: "I want my husband's pay or I don't move from this spot!"

Mrs. Fedder, in light of all the circumstances, was full of understanding, and persuaded her husband to return Moisheleh's pay to his irate wife. Mrs. Moisheleh's parting words were:

"Moisheleh will get his at home!" . . .

I got the impression she was not referring to the check.

The next morning, Moisheleh Soldat came to work with a black eye and bruises. Mr. Fedder, who came in later than usual, was decorated in white plasters and a few

stitches on one ear. Both of them, Fedder and Moisheleh, stared at each other like hens in a barnyard, and Mr. Goldstein, his derby atilt, stood on the sidelines, not knowing exactly what tone to adopt in this unprecedented situation.

The workers sat at their places for a few moments, as though they were expecting something out of the ordinary to happen, and then, disappointed, fell to their work. But as the day progressed, I found myself the center of attention. Instead of reenacting the play, they had seen in the theater, as they normally would have done, they pumped me with ceaseless questions about what had gone on in the shop the night before. I made the story as interesting as I could.

In the days following, Mr. Fedder became a very busy man. Whenever the workers would start a game and ask him to take a hand, he had the same reply:

"No! Not now! I don't have time!" And as he said this, his hand seemed to move instinctively up to his ear.

CHAPTER 8

A Gangster Shop on the Lower East Side

JOEY WAS A HANDSOME young fellow without a trade. His father, a contractor of inexpensive men's clothing, had a shop on Mulberry Street. When the old man took sick, Joey came into the business.

Joey knew next to nothing about tailoring. As a child, he used to help his mother carry bundles of work. At most he learned how to "pull stitches." Beyond that he didn't know a flap from a button hole.

But he was an expert with the women. Among the girls in the shop, there was a finisher, Bessie, a pretty girl with black hair and flashing eyes. As soon as Joey became boss he made Bessie forelady. Bessie knew his weakness. She fired all the older women and hired young, pretty ones in their place. And despite Joey's ignorance of the garment trade, the shop prospered.

But this was not just an ordinary shop. Exactly what all the ramifications were we never knew, but somewhere Joey was involved with East Side gangsters. You took your life into your hands by merely walking up the dark stairs that led to it. Hardly a day went by without somebody being stabbed or shot in that corridor. The workers in the shop said that every such incident was "designed by Joey."

Bessie, as forelady, soon became insolent. She lorded it over the operators as though this were a prison and she the warden. Old workers were continually being

fired and new ones hired. Every few weeks the workers had to slip her "hush money." Joey thought there was nobody her equal. She knew how to please him.

But her boy-friend, Mike, a presser, did not like the whole situation. Mike was a simple, decent worker, strong, and built like an athlete. One day, Bessie fired a presser who had dared object to her insults. The next morning, the other pressers, Mike among them, demanded he be rehired. There was no union in the shop and this was a purely spontaneous action.

In the meantime, Joey, who usually stayed out of such disputes, interfered and ordered Mike out of the shop. From his words and his manner, it was obvious that the episode had been prearranged by him and Bessie. In retaliation, the pressers, to a man, resolved then and there not to come to work the following day. Joey's threats of violence did not frighten them.

The next day, when we came to the shop to see whether we were still working or not, we found a crowd milling about the entrance. Someone had found a drunken woman inside the corridor, beaten up and her dress tied around her head. It was Bessie. When they revived her, she told this story: She had been having supper with a friend and they had had a drink or two. When she had returned to the shop to meet her boss, somebody had knocked her down and she had lain there in the corridor till morning.

The same day, Joey straightened matters out with the pressers. They came back to work. But Bessie returned as a finisher, not as forelady.

Whenever Bessie forgot her recent downfall and opened her mouth to "chew out" one of the finishers, no one said a word. But somebody would invariably go

through the motions of tying a knot around her head. This always shut her up. . . .

The shop was constantly embroiled in conspiracies. And although Bessie was no longer forelady, everyone was wary of her. Joey still considered her his advisor; she reported everything that went on to him. The atmosphere was most unpleasant and we were always on the lookout for jobs in other shops.

New Year's Eve was approaching and Bessie had been bragging about her coming date with Joey, the boss—"nightclub, champagne and all the trimmings." But none of the elaborate plans were destined to materialize.

Among the girls in the shop was a button-sewer named Mary, a young, pretty girl who had been brought up by a very strict mother. Every evening, Mary's mother would be waiting for her outside the building. She permitted Mary to work overtime only on condition that Bessie would keep an eye on her and bring her home.

Gradually, Bessie began to influence the girl and soon Joey and Mary became "intimate friends." Many an evening he spent with her after Bessie had convinced her mother that Mary was working overtime and "making lots of money."

The day before New Year's, however, Mary confessed to her mother and father that she was going to have a baby, that Joey was the father, and that Bessie was responsible for bringing them together. On New Year's Eve, right before quitting time, precisely when Joey had broken open a bottle for the workers. Mary's father and her two brothers burst into the shop and gave Joey a party to remember. They turned the place upside down and inside out. Before they had finished, Joey lay in one corner beaten half to death and Bessie, in another corner,

was not much better off. We, the workers in the shop, immediately proclaimed our neutrality and fled the scene.

After New Year's Day, we got our opportunity to look for jobs elsewhere. Joey's shop was out of business.

CHAPTER 9

Picketing with the Torah

MR. GAFFEN had been a butcher back in the old country in Galicia. Here in America he was at first a presser, then he became a partner in a "corporation." Together with five other workers he took over a shop on Allen Street from a former *landsman* who went back to Galicia. This corporation, however, soon dissolved, and Mr. Gaffen became the sole owner. He himself was the author of a joke at his own expense "I'm back in the butcher business but here I skin 'em alive!"

And he was hardly exaggerating. He was the right man to be a boss in the sweatshop system. His shop was an immigration bureau. It was the first home for many a greenhorn "just off the boat." It was the place to find your *landsleit*. Here the decision was made as to what trade an immigrant would follow. Naturally, it was the trade which Mr. Gaffen suggested. If Mr. Gaffen happened to be short of an operator at the time, then the immigrant became an operator. If it was a presser that was lacking, then he became a presser.

Mr. Gaffen would welcome the new arrival with whisky and garlicwurst. Then he would instruct me to take the greenhorn to the bathhouse on Allen Street. At that time, I was learning how to work on lapels. So I would stick my needle back of the lapel and while waiting for the "greenhorn," I would sometimes take a bath myself. If the immigrant had someone to put him up, he would go there to

sleep. If he didn't, he could always find a place in the shop to sleep. A few bundles of cloth atop a long table made a comfortable "mattress" and a coat or two served as a blanket.

Mr. Gaffen was an exploiter *par excellence.* He transferred and transmuted the vocabulary of the butcher-shop, including its "picturesque" swearing, to the garment-trade, and used it mercilessly on his "slaves." There were no fixed working-hours in his shop. On one of the walls hung an ancient clock with one hand, a fitting symbol of the meaninglessness of time for Mr. Gaffen's workers. All week long we worked into the late hours. Those who slept in the shop would sometimes wake up in the middle of the night and "knock out" some more work. Only on Friday evenings would we leave early. But on Saturday evening after *Havdalah,* we were back to work again.

The shop served also as a synagogue. In one corner stood an ark with a *Sefer-Torah.* Whenever Mr. Gaffen wanted to swear by something, to support one of his lies, he would say: "As you see a sacred thing in my shop, so am I telling you the truth!"

On Saturday nights the *landsleit* used to gather at Mr. Gaffen's shop. On the table there was always a bottle of whisky, a loaf of bread and some wurst and pickles. Some of the men would start up a game of cards. Others would sit down at their machines and do a little work. They called this, "making a good week," after the traditional Jewish greeting on the outgoing of the Sabbath.

Once the following incident occurred in Mr. Gaffen's shop:

Our *landsman,* Hirsh-Leyb, the head operator, bought "ship-tickets" for his wife and children to bring them over to America. (Naturally, he bought them on install-

ments.) A few days before they were to sail, one of his children took sick and died. The news shattered Hirsh-Leyb completely. He could not stop crying; the shop became like a synagogue on *Yom Kippur.* All of us wept with him and for him.

But no sooner had Hirsh-Leyb left the shop to begin his traditional week's mourning, than Mr. Gaffen took me aside: "Go right down to the Pig Market and bring me an operator!" I went down to Hester Park and came back with an operator. Without any questions he sat down at the machine and began to work. Mr. Gaffen was pleased. "That," he beamed, "is what I call a lean rump-steak! He knows his business!"

A week later, when Hirsh-Leyb returned to work, his lapel torn in the sign of mourning, and his heart broken, Gaffen told him casually that an operator had to have a clear head and that he, Hirsh-Leyb, was no longer in fit condition to work for him.

"What are you doing to me, Mr. Gaffen! At a time like this you fire me. You're sticking a knife into my heart!" The pain and despair in his voice were as intense as when he had heard the news of his child's death.

"I don't stick knives in anybody's heart," said Gaffen coldly. "I was once a butcher, but never a *shochet!*"

Gaffen's cruel joke made my blood boil and as I looked at Hirsh-Leyb's helpless face I was reminded of something my father had once done in the old country. He had had a complaint against a rich man in Lipsk and he could not get the townspeople to listen to him. So one Sabbath in the synagogue, he took up a position in front of the Holy Ark and when the time came to read the *Torah,* he shouted: "I won't let you take out the Torah until you

listen to what I have to say!" It was like picketing with the *Torah.*

So I caught Hirsh-Leyb's attention and whispered: "Don't let them read the *Torah* on Saturday and the workers will listen to you!"

The following Saturday I made certain I was at the *minyan* (the ten men necessary for praying). My heart told me this would not be an ordinary service. Hirsh-Leyb, as usual, came to services. As he prayed, his sighs and groans attracted the attention of the other members of the congregation. After the morning-service, when the time arrived to read the *Torah,* the excitement started. Hirsh-Leyb took his place before the Ark and would not be budged. "Listen to me! . . . listen . . ."

Suddenly, Mr. Gaffen's loud voice rose above the tumult: "Even if I have to close up my shop, he'll never work for me again! Never! Get out, you atheist, you sinner! You came especially to break up our services!"

The rest of the men at the service looked at each other meaningfully and as though at a signal began to fold up their prayer shawls. They could no longer pray in a place where an unfortunate human being was being treated so inhumanly. But the real surprise was yet to come. The new operator leaped up on a chair and began to speak:

"Men! We've got to act together! He won't use me to break this strike! Gaffen can go burn with his shop together!"

On Sunday morning, we were all back to work, including Hirsh-Leyb. Mr. Gaffen was real friendly again, especially toward Hirsh-Leyb. "As you see the Holy Ark in my shop," he swore, "I didn't really want to fire you. I only thought that a man of your ability should go into another line of work. . . ."

CHAPTER 10

A Deaf Boss With Good Ears

(*"My work—it drives me out at dawn, and brings me home at midnight. My own body has become a stranger to me, and so has my own child. . . ."*)

THUS SANG THE POET Morris Rosenfeld as he lamented the fate of the sweatshop worker of long ago.

Shlomeh Gafrin, finisher, felt this fate on his own back. This was in 1910 and Shlomeh was then working for Yoshkeh, on Pike Street. They used to call him "Yoshkeh the Deaf." But he was not deaf. He had perfect hearing. You could even say he had ears like a dog. He heard every movement in the shop. He would run around wildly, insulting anyone who came into his vision. And he was just as free with his hands. Once he even went so far as to pull the beard of a patriarchal old worker in the shop.

He became "Yoshkeh The Deaf" only when you asked him for your wages. Every worker in his shop used to get paid on a different day and only at two or three-week intervals. What's more, he would usually try to cheat on the accounts. If a worker would dare protest, Yoshkeh would say: "I can't hear you. Talk to the wall!" And if a worker insisted on his rights, it would often end up in a fist fight.

Shlomeh, the finisher, was a submissive slave. No matter what Yoshkeh said to him, he never uttered a word. He would not let a sigh escape his lips when Yoshkeh was nearby. Only when the boss was out of hearing range would

he take a deep breath and complain to himself: "A bitter life. A terrible world. Lousy, brothers, lousy. . . ."

Shlomeh had a wife and three children waiting for his wages at home. He never forgot the total of his dependents. His wife was constantly reminding him: "Shlomeh, you're the father of three kids; how can we get by on your pitiful wages?" So Shlomeh knew very well that he had three children. But often he did not see them for days and weeks at a time.

Shlomeh lived somewhere far off in Brooklyn with relatives. He had to take three street-cars and travel a couple of hours to get to Delancey Street. So he had to be up at four every morning. He would get home at ten in the evening. And then he would sit down at home to work again.

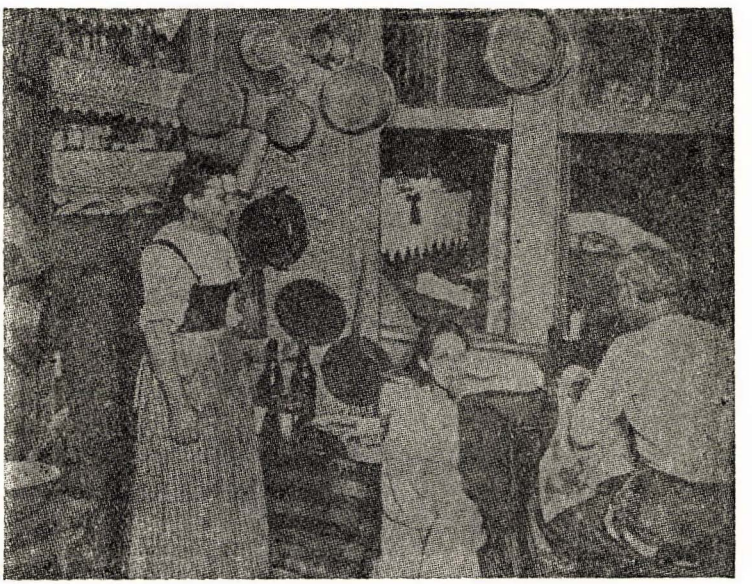
His wife had often felt ashamed that her neighbors had never seen Shlomeh wheeling his children in their baby-carriages. Nor had they ever seen Shlomeh and his wife going out together, even for a walk. So she was glad when Shlomeh began to bring work home. The extra money was sorely needed. But that was not the main thing. There was something else. Every night at ten o'clock Shlomeh's wife would take the baby-carriage and wait for Shlomeh to get off the street-car with the bundle of work. She would put the bundle in the carriage and cover it with a blanket. She hoped that people would think they were out for a walk with the baby. . . .

Thus they kept their rendezvous throughout the busy season.

The work that Shlomeh brought home consisted of trimming, cutting and turning belts, loops, flaps, and basting the work for the presser, because it was "bluffed-edge."

One morning Shlomeh started out for work carrying a

large paper bag containing the work which he and his wife had finished the night before, as well as some which they had not been able to complete. Shlomeh sat in the street-car saying his morning prayers and turning the flaps



A Sweatshop in a Kitchen

inside the bag with his thumb. At Myrtle Avenue, he stood up to say the *Shmoneh-esra* (the prayer which requires standing in the same place and not to speak). He left the bag lying on his seat. At the corner, the car stopped to take on passengers. The car became crowded. A Gentile man, who had just boarded, pushed Shlomeh's paper bag to one side and sat down in Shlomeh's seat. Shlomeh would never even have thought of interrupting his prayer, which would have been a sin. All he permitted himself to say was, "Nu, nu, *Shmoneh-esra!*"

But the intruder knew nothing of any *"Shmoneh-esra"*

and refused to acknowledge Shlomeh's right to the seat. To emphasize his opinion, he pushed Shlomeh aside. Shlomeh tried to defend himself. The passenger then picked up the paper bag and threw it to the floor. They began to wrestle. Others tried to separate them. In a moment, the flaps, loops and belts were strewn over the car. With the help of some of the Jewish passengers, Shlomeh managed to gather up the pieces and put them back in the bag before the car reached Delancey Street. But the colors became hopelessly mixed up.

Shlomeh, hurrying into the shop with the pieces sticking out of the half-torn bag, was a picture of despair and misfortune. His collar was ripped open and his coat torn, but that was nothing compared to the look of bereavement in his eyes as he stared at the wreckage in the bag. It was only with difficulty that we finally got the story from him, more or less coherently.

Now there was no thought of sitting down to work. First we had to set Shlomeh's scrambled pieces in order, sort them out and match up the colors.

At half-past seven, Yoshkeh the Deaf walked into the shop. One look at the torn bag and the soiled pieces spread out on the table and he began to swear at Shlomeh and hit him in the chest with his fist. Shlomeh said nothing, but tears formed in his eyes. Yoshkeh continued to fume.

"All of you! Fix up this mess! And I'm warning you now, you won't get a penny for it! You hear me, greenhorns!"

The following morning Shlomeh found another finisher threading his machine. A beaten man, he shuffled over to Yoshkeh with his hands outstretched, like a pious Jew pleading to God: "What could I do? At least pay me the money you owe me . . . because the Almighty . . ."

"Nuts to you and the Almighty together!" spat Yoshkeh, and he lunged for Shlomeh to throw him out of the shop.

At this point, the lamb became a tiger. Like a Jew going to martyrdom for his religion, Shlomeh shuddered once and cried out: "You curse God too? I'll break your filthy neck." Enraged, he scooped up a heavy iron and began beating Yoshkeh. . . .

The workers in that shop had not even learned what a union was, but all of them, as one man, walked out even before the doctor arrived to stich up Yoshkeh's wounds.

CHAPTER 11

The Mock-Marriage

LIFE IN THE SWEAT-SHOP was miserable enough for the men, but for the women it was a thousand times worse.

Many of the immigrant men were without their wives. And even those who had already brought their families over seldom had time to spend in their company. The result was that many of the men became coarsened and their language inside the shop verged on the pornographic. For a woman who was unaccustomed to it, there was no greater torments than to work in the midst of this vulgarity.

But the most brazen and disgusting talk used to come from the foremen and the bosses. And for a simple reason. Whereas a woman could sometimes muster up the courage to put an ordinary worker in his place, she was pathetically frightened of her superiors. So there was no limit to the dirty talk directed at her by the boss or foreman, and all she could do was grit her teeth and swallow the humiliation, as she listened to the workers around her laughing at the "joke."

One day I went up to Feingold & Atkins on Christie Street to try for a job. I had only been there a few hours when I noticed that some of the men were wisecracking a girl they called *"Pesha the Rebbetsin,"* (because of her piety). She was a pretty young girl working at a small table in a corner of the shop. Every few minutes some-

one else was trying to teach her to thread a needle, to hold a scissors, to crook her finger, to wear her thimble properly. Apparently she was an extremely pious girl. You could almost see it in her face. When she took a drink of water she made the appropriate blessing. Before she ate her lunch, she washed her hands and said the blessings. At every opportunity God's name was on her lips. (Later I learned that she was the only daughter of a scholar who had been murdered in a pogrom in 1908, and that she was a learned person in her own right.)

So you can understand that the vulgar and filthy talk of the men around her literally drove her to tears. Worse than this were the "innocent" actions of the boss, who would come over every so often supposedly to show her something — always to the accompaniment of a pinch, a touch, a brush against her youthful, blooming body.

One late afternoon, Mr. Atkins came over to her table



Pesha the Pious at Work

to light the gas-lamp. He began to clean the glass and as he did so made some suggestive remark to Pesha. She became embarrassed and unnerved. As she moved away from the table, in order to avoid his grubby hands, her thimble slipped off her finger to the floor and she bent

to look for it. When Mr. Atkins finished the lamp he helped her look for the thimble and found it.

"Here," he offered, "let me show you how to wear this so it won't fall off!"

Pesha held out her hand and as he put the thimble on her finger he said gleefully: *"Haray at mekudeshes lee b'tabat zu k'das Moshe v'Yisroel!"* ("With this ring I wed thee according to the laws of Moses and Israel" — the prescribed formula by which a man makes a woman his wife.)

Some of the young fellows laughed, but Hirshke, the presser, protested to Mr. Atkins: "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, the way you behave to that innocent child!"

At that moment a "practical joker" squirted cold water on the hot gas-lamp. The glass "exploded" and the foreman, who was standing by beaming at the boss's joke, shouted *"Mazl-tov! Mazl-tov!"*

This was too much for Pesha. She burst into a hysterical, frightened weeping and fell to the floor in a dead faint.

The laughter ceased as the other women tried to revive her. They brought her to, but she could not compose herself. Her sobbing, screaming and weeping threw a fright into everyone else in the shop. The boss would not allow us to call a doctor, so I ran to Stanton Street and brought Pesha's mother. To her frantic questions, I replied only that Pesha wasn't feeling well.

When she ran into the shop and saw Pesha in her hysterical state, she began to tear her hair and wail: "What happened to her? What have you done to my daughter, my only child!"

Pesha, pointing to Mr. Atkin's office, moaned in terror: "He married me . . . with this thimble . . . I am his

wife . . . wife. . ." And they began to cry together, helplessly, as the world seemed to come to an end for both of them. Hirshke, the presser, took them by the arm and led them home. There was no more work done in the shop that day.

The next morning, a well-dressed, elegantly-bearded Jew carrying a walking-stick strode into the shop and asked imperiously for Mr. Atkins. Mr. Atkins came out of his office white as a sheet and listened submissively to a series of crisp commands. He was to appear right after the evening service at the home of Rabbi So-and-so on East Broadway.

A few days later Hirshke, the presser, told us what had happened in the rabbi's study. "The Rabbi made Mr. Atkins swear that the 'wedding-ring' was a thimble, not a ring, that it was made of steel and not gold; and that he would pay Pesha her six dollars for the week. He shook his finger at the boss and called him the worst kind of evil sinner to make such sport of an innocent orphan like Pesha!"

For a long time afterward, the women in the shop breathed a little more easily. The vulgar talk subsided. But Pesha never came back to work there again.

CHAPTER 12

Sadists

THIS HAPPENED AT THE SHOP of Farber & Smith on Spring Street. When I came to work there, they told me it was their first day on electric machines. The old machines already stood at the door like uninvited guests. But at the windows, in a row, were eight brand-new Singer sewing machines with a huge truck alongside of them for piling up the finished work. These eight machines were driven by one motor which turned a large leather pulley connected to a cylinder. The cylinder had smaller wheels which turned pulleys connected to each machine. The slightest pressure on the treadle set the machine going.

Several of the operators already knew how to use these new electric machines. The greenhorns had still to learn, but in a few weeks most of us caught on. There was one exception, a young fellow who was deathly afraid of this new contraption. And the ridicule hurled his way by Tony, the foreman, and the two bosses, only made his fear more acute.

One day, the belt on his machine came loose and fell off the pulley. Frightened, he crawled under his machine to try to put it back. The other workers, unfortunately, gave him no assistance or encouragement. The foreman, on his part, picked up a pillow from a chair and tossed it to the floor: "Here, take a nap while you're down there!" For ten minutes, the poor fellow lay under the machine and could not get the belt back in place.

At this point, Mr. Farber, the boss, lost patience and said to Tony: "Come on! Drag him out of there and throw him out of the shop!"

Tony didn't need much urging; he grabbed the greenhorn by the leg and began to pull him out. His victim instinctively pulled back. As he did so, his hair was caught and entangled in the belt of another machine which was running. A groan went through the entire shop. Someone thought quickly and shut off the main motor, but the fellow's scalp, resisting the pull of the belt, was already ripped. He was taken to the hospital immediately, but what happened to him afterward, we never found out.

This wretched occurrence reminds me of several others which happened as a result of the all-pervading gloom, worry, exploitation, and to some extent, ignorance, which prevailed in those days.

I think of the terrible conditions at a place called Levy & Son on Christie Street. Even for those days it was an exceptionally bad place to work in. There was no clock in the shop. Wages were paid every three or four weeks and even then, in "part payments." Worst of all, however, was the sadistic nature of Mr. Levy. He once caught an operator smoking at a machine. He crept up in back of the man, snatched the cigarette out of his hand and choked it out against his arm. In the washroom, he removed the door from the stall, to prevent anyone smoking there or taking a few moments' rest.

There was a lining-maker in this shop — Benny was his name, I remember. He suffered from a sick stomach and spent a lot of time in the lavatory. This was on his own time, of course, since he was paid on a piece-work basis. But Mr. Levy couldn't stand it anyway. He had to "teach him a lesson." One day, while Benny was in the

washroom, Levy took an oil-can and placed it on Benny's chair. When Benny came out of the washroom and saw the boss standing by his machine, he became panic-stricken and hurried over to his seat. Without looking, he came down on the point of the oil-can and as he did so he let out a scream of pain; but even louder than his scream was Mr. Levy's horselaugh at precisely the same moment.

A similar "practical joke" was arranged by a boss named Strickman in a shop on Monroe Street. One of the workers, Lazer, the finisher, had been complaining that the thread was rotten and falling apart in his hands. Strickman pretended to stage an experiment to test the strength of the thread. He pulled and pulled on a length of thread until it broke and his fist struck Lazer, standing nearby, in the eye. Lazer's vision was irreparably damaged by this "accidental" blow. But this was not enough for Mr. Strickman. He made up a "clever joke." Afterward, whenever Lazer had trouble threading a needle, he would say: "Here, Lazer, take this chalk and put a mark on the needle, so you'll know where the hole is!"

Thus did these sadists pour salt on the wounds which they themselves had inflicted.

CHAPTER 13

"The Society"

ON GOERICK STREET there was a shop which belonged to a contractor named Chuneh Miller. They called this establishment "The Society." "I'm working at The Society," the tailors used to say.

The nickname came about this way: Chuneh Miller had come from Roumania. The *landsleit* who had known him "back home" remembered him as a rather shady character. In America, Chuneh Miller became a successful contractor of children's clothes. His wife ran a trimming-store on Hester Street.

Generally, Miller used to hire only his *landsleit.* In an emergency, he would hire non-*landsleit,* too. But no sooner did a ship land with more of his townsmen from Roumania than out went the "stranger" and in went the *landsman.*

When the *landsleit* organized a Society, Miller became its first president. His greatest delight was in hearing Shaya Funk, a former scholar who now worked for him as a presser, ask him for the floor at meetings of the Society. This was sweet vengeance for Miller, who had been known in the old country as "Chuneh Lightfingers."

Now, Mr. Miller had a beautiful daughter who was the bookkeeper. And Asher, the Fitter, had a handsome son whom he brought in to the shop to learn the trade. Naturally, the young people fell in love.

However, Asher and his wife were not satisfied with

the match. After all, they complained, their son's grandfather was once the cantor of the town synagogue in the old country. They did not think Chuneh Miller, with his previous reputation, would make a suitable in-law for them. But their son paid no attention to these objections, as is usual in such situations. And Chuneh was very proud of this "pedigreed" addition to his family.

Preparations went ahead for the wedding. The workers in the shop had long discussions about what to give the happy couple for a wedding present. The wags and mimics had a lot of fun imagining what Chuneh Miller would look like in a top-hat. They suggested that at the wedding, Asher would probably deliver a sermon on *Torah,* and Chuneh would make a speech about horses.

Suddenly, however, a cloud descended on the shop and its anticipation of a "good time." It gradually became known that Miller's daughter had met a designer, fallen in love with him, and returned the engagement ring which Willie, Asher's son, had bought for her "on time."

The Society went topsy-turvy. Arguments about this latest development went on day and night. Sides formed. Miller, however, was just as pleased with the *new* match. Maybe even more, he began to calculate the additional business that the designer would bring in to his shop. Perhaps he could enlarge his business, become a manufacturer in his own right, with his son-in-law as partner, instead of remaining a little contractor all his life.

The *landsleit* in the shop, however, did not content themselves so easily. They were mainly on the side of Asher, the Fitter, and his son. So they became quite upset about the dissolved engagement, especially when they heard that Miller was looking for a new fitter. Their fears were justified. One Friday afternoon, Miller fired Asher, the Fitter, together with his son Willie.

That Sunday afternoon, the meeting of the Society was tumultuous. At first, the differences of opinion were expressed verbally, but when words proved insufficient and unimpressive, chairs and benches were substituted. Finally, a decision was reached by one group of workers. They resolved that on Monday they would come to the shop and sit at their machines, but they would refuse to work. They had to teach Chuneh and his daughter a lesson.

Monday morning, Chuneh Miller's shop was the scene of probably the first sit-down strike in history. The workers did not call it a strike. They merely said: "We're not working without Asher and Willie!"

Thus they "sat" all day. At four o'clock in the afternoon, the designer came into the shop and told them to bring Asher and his son in to work the following morning.

A few weeks later, Chuneh's daughter was married to the designer. Only two pressers came to the wedding. And when Miller brought whisky and cake into the shop to celebrate, only a few of the *landsleit* drank a *"l'chayim"* with him.

After the wedding, Miller began to seek ways and means of improving relationships between himself and his *landsleit.* The first "fence" he had to mend was The Society itself, where he could very easily be dethroned. (Indeed, a group of *landsleit* in the shop was already leaving no stone unturned in their campaign to make Chuneh an *ex*-big shot.) And elections in the Society were at hand.

On the Sunday of the elections, he ordered an elaborate "spread" from Shapiro's Restaurant to be sent to the meeting of the Society, which met at 98 Forsythe Street. On schedule, the whisky and tongue and corned-beef and

kishka were delivered and consumed. But the guest of honor did not show up at all!

When the time arrived on the agenda for nominations for president, Chuneh Miller's name was proposed once, twice, but Miller was not there to accept. So the name of Harry Greenstein, the head operator, was placed in nomination and he was elected. But what had happened to Chuneh Miller?

On Monday morning we found out. It seems that on Sunday, just as he was preparing to leave for the meeting of the Society, someone had come to his home with the alarming news that his shop had been ransacked during the night. Miller went racing to Goerick Street. When he got inside the place he saw immediately that the shop was exactly as it had been left the night before. Furious, he started back out, but the door had been locked from the outside and he could not open it. There was no telephone. He screamed and yelled, but no one on the outside heard him. His wife, meanwhile, was waiting for him at her trimming-store. After more than an hour had passed and he still had not come, she fetched her daughter and son-in-law and they went looking for Chuneh. The first place they looked was the shop. Here they found him, "fit to be tied," but by this time the meeting of the Society was over and Miller was no longer president.

CHAPTER 14

The Weaker Sex

THERE WAS AN UNWRITTEN LAW in the sweatshop that women were not to become machine-operators. In the men's clothing field, they did only certain operations – making buttonholes, sewing on buttons, basting linings, and other handwork – but machine-operation was reserved for the men.

So there was great alarm among the tailors when they heard that at the Lithuanian Meklash's shop on Cherry



Seamstress on Cherry Street

Street, women had started working at the machines. The news evoked a bitter debate. One faction proposed that the women be dragged out of there by the hair. The

other faction said that the guilty ones were really the men who had agreed to work with these women and that such men "should have their bones broken." Gus Miller, a pocket-maker, intoned bitterly: "Today they're working as helpers, tomorrow they'll be running a set!" Zalman, the Presser, screamed: "If we keep quiet about it, they'll become pressers and operators too! We won't be able to drop our suspenders or take off our shirts!"

Just about that time there was a story current to this effect: A certain sleevemaker had taught his sweetheart to make sleeves on the machine. She had then dressed up as a man and he had gotten her a job in his shop. She worked there for six weeks until one day someone noticed that the new sleevemaker had pierced ears! There was an uproar in the shop and the girl and her sweetheart were both "sacked." This story may have been fiction but the following is fact:

At Golubitsky's shop on Scammle Street there was an operator named Danzig. Danzig was a sub-contractor who managed the "sets." One day, Golubitsky told Danzig that a cousin of his, Rachel, was coming from Chicago; that she was an experienced pocketmaker; that he wanted Danzig to put her to work in one of the sets and pay her the same rate, eleven dollars a week, as he was paying the other two helpers.

Rachel was clever and skilled, and pretty into the bargain. The other workers saw immediately that she was a first-class operator. They began to speculate among themselves that in time Golubitsky would probably hire more women operators and get rid of all the men. But instead of making preparations to prevent the boss from doing that (as Rachel quietly advised them), they started making her life miserable.

They began by playing various tricks on her, like

smearing oil on her coat, hiding her shoes, etc. Then Danzig arranged with the other two helpers that her pay be cut to nine dollars. They agreed to this on the theory that Rachel was not a man and didn't have to support a wife and children, and therefore did not need the same wages as a man. She tried to prove to them that with this



Working Woman

kind of reasoning they were only hurting themselves, that if the boss saw her doing the same work as they for less money he would sooner or later hire women to work for him. But she could not convince them.

After debating the matter for a few days with Golubitsky, and with Rachel, they decided to go out on strike. The entire set stopped work with a warning to the boss that they would refuse to work as long as a woman ran a machine. The pressers and the tailors stayed on. This was because they were not too fond of the operators, who thought they were "better" than the rest of the workers; secondly, they argued that since they had to put up with women at the tables, then let the operators also get a taste of it. . . .

The following morning, when Golubitsky arrived at the shop, he found all the operators standing at the door, Rachel among them. He began to talk to them, to reassure them, to appeal to their emotions — after all, Rachel was an orphan and needed every cent to help out her mother. When this failed to persuade them he began to threaten: he would advertise in the papers for more women operators, and *only* women operators.

Then he took Rachel's arm and said: "Come, let's go in and get to work!"

Rachel, however, to everyone's amazement, pulled away from him and exclaimed: "What do you mean, 'get to work'! What am I, a scab? You may be my cousin, but these men are my brothers! We disagree now, so? So we'll talk it over until we reach an understanding, but I — a scab? Nothing doing!"

The next day, all the men agreed to go back to work only if Rachel were allowed to go back with them . . . but Golubitsky refused to have "that ingrate" in his shop. . . .

CHAPTER 15

The Class-Conscious Cop

ON MONROE STREET, there was a shop that made an inexpensive line of men's clothing. It belonged to one Pashkin. Mr. Pashkin could not read or write, or even sign his own name. But he gave the impression of being an educated man. He possessed the natural traits of a clever and intelligent man and knew how to cover up his own rough edges.

On one occasion, a leader of the United Garment Workers' Union, Mr. Schweitzer, asked Mr. Pashkin: "How come a cultured man like you objects to a union in his shop? How can you stand by and see such learned Jews, pious men with beards, suffering under such inhuman working conditions?"

Pashkin answered at once with this bit of "philosophy:" "Did I ask them to become pressers or tailors? For my part, they could all have become teachers! And must I pay them extra for their beards? Am I holding onto their beards to stop them from shaving? Listen to me, Mr. Schweitzer. The Socialists really ought to thank me. If I treated my workers too good and gave them everything they want, the Socialists and Anarchists would never even dream of a revolution. But if there ever *is* a revolution, it will be thanks to me and others like me. . ."

Pashkin's workers, however, with and without beards, could stand so much and no more. Eventually, they began to whisper about regular weekly pay and shorter hours,

but chiefly about changing Mr. Pashkin's crude behavior toward his employees.

One day Pashkin got wind of the fact that leaflets were being distributed inside and near his shop, calling on his workers to strike. The next morning, he hid across the street in a Chinese laundry, to see if he could catch the culprit who was giving out the leaflets.

It didn't take long and Mr. Pashkin, stationed behind a curtained window, saw a young boy arrive with a pack of leaflets and begin handing them out to the workers entering his shop. He ran out, took hold of the boy by the ear, called a policeman and had him arrested. At the hearing, Pashkin appeared with a couple of his lieutenants to give evidence that incendiary leaflets had been distributed in the street by this boy. Pashkin plunged into his act.

"Your honor, you see this boy, he is a Socialist who wants to make a revolution. You see these leaflets? They tell a lot of lies about me and my shop. They want to kill me, these Anarchists. . . ."

The boy listened, a look of fear and confusion on his face, but obviously he had no idea what was going on. Suddenly the judge asked him:

"Are you getting paid for distributing these leaflets?"

"Yes," replied the boy. "Fifty cents a day."

"Who gave them to you?" asked the judge.

"A man in Blank's Delicatessen on Monroe Street."

"Mr. Pashkin," said the judge, "please read what is printed on those leaflets."

Mr. Pashkin, who could not have read the leaflet in *any* language, turned it this way and that, and excused himself by saying that he could not read Yiddish. The judge then asked one of Pashkin's witnesses to read it — aloud. As soon as he began to read, laughter burst out

all over the courtroom. It was an advertisement for a new delicatessen store near the shop. "ALL THIS WEEK – FREE – ONE BOTTLE OF SODA WITH EVERY SANDWICH!"

Mr. Pashkin slunk out of the courtroom ashamed and embarrassed.

But the real leaflets were effective. A few weeks later a strike was called at the shop and almost all of the workers went out. A number, however, remained, and helped to bring in other scabs.

The policeman who was assigned to maintain order was asked by Mr. Pashkin to escort the scabs out of the shop, one by one, at quitting time. Mr. Pashkin, of course, promised to "compensate him for his trouble."

One day, as we all stood outside the shop, this policeman took hold of my arm and walked me toward the corner. The others thought I was being arrested. When we had gotten a little distance away from the shop, he said to me quietly:

"Do you know there are still eight men working at Pashkin's?"

"Certainly we know!"

"Listen. I want to help you. But you'll have to be careful. There are a lot of people coming in and out of that building and you can't always tell who the scabs are. Here's what I'll do. Whenever a scab comes out I'll pat him on the shoulder like an old friend and walk him down to the corner. You arrange to have a committee there to talk to him; try to convince him to be a man and not a skunk."

I refused to believe my own ears. When I related this to the others, they tried to figure out what kind of trap the policeman was setting for us. But that same evening we convinced ourselves that he was not deceiving us.

Every man he patted on the back was a scab. And our committee was waiting at the corner.

All that week he found opportunities to talk with us and tell us what was going on in the shop. So we decided to give him a gift to show our appreciation. We put a ten-dollar bill in an envelope and handed it to him one afternoon on the sly. But he thrust it right back at us and exclaimed angrily:

"What do you think I am, a scab?"

Then he burst out laughing. "I'm a cop who doesn't take graft! Besides, I'm Gedaliah's son — Gedaliah, the Presser!"

He put his hand in his pocket and took out a five-dollar bill. "Here! Here's a contribution . . . from Mr. Pashkin! *His* money I don't mind taking — after all, I'm giving him protection!"

CHAPTER 16

My First May Day Parade

IN 1912, I WENT TO WORK at Goldfarb's on Madison and Jackson Streets. This was really my first large, modern shop. In my "set," there were eight other pocketmakers. It was not a union shop, but the workers there still talked about the last attempt to organize the men. There had been a strike and some of the men had gone out. The boss had poured hot water down on the pickets.

Goldfarb had a foreman, Blumenthal, who was a first-rate exploiter. At the same time, he was also a so-called "Socialist"; after working hours, he was "Comrade Blumenthal. "

The head of the pocketmakers set was an operator whom we called "Meshugener (Crazy) Cohen." His assistant was a missionary for Christianity who worked six days a week and on the Sabbath tried to convert us. I was the third man in the team and earned about eleven dollars a week.

In those days the Brotherhood of Tailors, a members of the United Garment Worker's Union, set out to organize the trade; there was even talk of a general strike.

The terrible working conditions in Goldfarb's led us to the decision to concentrate our organizing efforts at that point. If we succeeded here, then the smaller shops, "the cockroach bosses," would have to fall in line. I was already a union-man, but of course I had to keep this fact secret.

One morning, I found Ike Goldstein, a finisher, waiting for me outside the shop. He had volunteered to organize the tailors. He and David Oshinsky were then regarded by the workers as the "fathers" of the Tailors' Union. Goldstein was an interesting personality. I think he came from Dubrowa, where he had been a singer in a synagogue choir. In America he became an Anarchist. In the evening, he would go to hear a lecture by Yanovsky or some other popular speaker, and in the morning, he would already be delivering a similar lecture – but much more interesting – to the tailors.

Ike was rather weak on reading and writing, so he had to come to get my help in composing a leaflet for Goldfarb's workers. In a tiny room in Clinton Hall, he dictated and I wrote it down. Two days later, he delivered the printed leaflets to me to smuggle into the shop. The method of "smuggling" was as follows: we stuffed the leaflets into the bundles of work that lay ready for the operators. When the bundles were untied, the leaflets would fall out and the men would quickly gather them up. During the day, they would read them surreptitiously and the message would then circulate by word of mouth. The more this union-talk spread, the more brazen Blumenthal, the foreman, became in his effort to discover who was bringing the leaflets into the shop.

As May First approached, Blumenthal raged more and more beastlike. He stormed and threatened. "Anyone who stays out on May Day will be fired on the spot!" On May First, we all came to work as usual, but Blumenthal and Goldfarb had gotten there before us. The men were all talking about the big parade that was to take place that day. I had not yet learned of May Day, but what they were saying sounded good to me.

Later that morning, as we all sat deep in our work,

we suddenly heard the "brass and cymbal" of a band playing the Marseillaise. My heart began to beat time to the music, but my feet had to peddle to the rhythm of the machine. Blumenthal picked up a long window-pole and rushed excitedly from window to window to shut out "the noise of the battle." I could not resist the impulse to see what a May Day parade looked like. I could not have been at the window longer than half a minute, but when I turned back to my machine, Mr. Blumenthal was already standing there with a menacing look in his eye. I tried to get back into my seat but he viciously tore the spool of thread from my machine and screamed: "You feel like marching? March out that door — and don't ever come back!"

I walked down the six flights of steps feeling low and dejected and somewhat desperate. I was the sole support of my widowed mother and the eight children, and jobs were not easy to find. But when I got down to the street and saw the crowds of workers in their holiday mood, my shattered world seemed to grow whole again. I believe that at that moment I really understood the true significance of May First, the workers' holiday.

Bands were playing, people were singing in the streets. The union leaders, bedecked in red ribbons, rode at the head of their unions on white horses. The bakers carried a huge loaf of bread, bearing the slogan, "We Demand Enough For Every Worker!" The hat-makers carried a giant hat, like a canopy on four poles, with the slogan, "We Demand A Roof Over Every Worker's Head!". All the other trades marched with various demands, but every banner was so clever and original that it was a delight to see.

I came home in the evening, hungry and tired, but said nothing to my mother about the day's events. At

dawn, the next day, I was at the Pig Market looking for a boss who needed a pocketmaker. In the next few weeks I went from job to job, in one little sweatshop and out the other, but a decent job was not to be had.

One day, I met a worker from Goldfarb's who told me that the boss was having trouble finding a good pocketmaker to take my place. He thought that if I asked Blumenthal for my job back I would probably get it. At one o'clock that afternoon, I "happened to be standing" outside the restaurant where Blumenthal usually went for lunch. When he came out, he stopped, took one look at me, and then, without any ceremony, or even saying hello, asked me whether I would like to go back to work for him. I nodded and we walked back to the shop together, and I returned to my machine with the vow that Goldfarb's would become a union shop before long.

A few months later we had the men organized and called a strike. Goldfarb moved his place to Houston Street with the hope of hiring enough scabs to break the strike, but we followed him there too.

Eventually Blumenthal became a contractor, settled with the union and helped to organize the contractors' association. Some years afterward I was chairman of the settlement committee of the Joint Board. Mr. Hyman Blumenthal had become the manager of the contractors' association. At the first negotiating meeting we met across the table.

I turned down the big, fat cigar he offered me. . . .

CHAPTER 17

A Blighted Passover

IT WAS THE DAY before Passover.

I was working on Mangin Street on the East Side, in a shop that belonged to two partners, Goldstein & Latov.

The Spring sun shone warmly over the roofs. Wherever the trees and grass found enough freedom, light and sunshine, they burst into greenery. Everywhere you could sense the coming holiday, Passover.

The pushcarts on the streets near the shop were heaped with Passover delicacies and with the Haggadahs (Passover prayer books) which the Yarmalovsky Bank had printed for its depositors and which the peddlers were now selling for a penny apiece.

At Goldstein & Latov's, the tailors, pressers and operators sat and waited for the holiday, but everything in the place was completely *chometzdig*. The walls had not been whitewashed since the building had been erected. The only cleaning-up that was ever done there was the collecting of the scraps by the ragman. The dust on the tables, chairs, shelves and windows was becoming petrified. The watchman, who used to sleep in the shop, had devised his own system for dealing with the rats. He used to put out pieces of hard crust for them to chew on, so that they wouldn't be tempted by the starch in the cloth that lay around the shop. The bars and ropes for hanging up the finished work kept out every bit of air and light. Each worker huddled in his own dark corner, surrounded

by the "bundles," enmeshed like a fly in a spider-web.

For weeks before Passover, the men dreamed and planned how they would spend their eight free days. Kalman, the Edgebaster, who fancied himself something of a tenor, rehearsed the holiday songs from the *Haggadah*. Alter, the baster, philosophized under his breath: "Our ancestors in Egypt had a picnic under Pharaoh, compared to us! They only had to carry straw; we have to carry sewing machines on our backs. . . ."

Nevertheless, everybody in the shop, observant Jew or not, waited impatiently for Passover. It was a time to rest one's tired bones; to feast one's eyes on wife and children; to enjoy the tasty holiday food on the Passover table in the company of loved ones. So the workers at Goldstein & Latov were all looking forward to Passover, especially since there had been a lot of work in the shop the past few weeks and their pay would be a little better than usual. Their wives had already spent the money preparing for Passover. Some of the operators had bought cloth to make themselves a new coat or a pair of pants for the holiday.

Passover began on Thursday that year, so Wednesday was payday. The men were finishing up and putting their tools away for the week. Kalman was singing the traditional prayer, with a cantorial tremolo. On the table, stood a bottle of wine — *"kosher l'Pesach."* All were waiting impatiently for Latov to come back from the main office with the pay checks.

But Latov was an hour late already. By 11 o'clock we became uneasy. Goldstein, the other partner, kept running back and forth to the window to look down the street. Where was Latov?

At 12 o'clock, we surrounded Goldstein. "You've got to do something. We want our money. We need it. We can't

wait any longer. We have to go home and get ready for the holiday. Our families are waiting. . . ."

Finally, we selected a committee of three to go to find out what had happened to Mr. Latov and our checks. At the main office, they told us that Latov had been there at ten o'clock and had asked for one check to cover the whole payroll, instead of the individual checks that were usually issued. His excuse was that the workers needed the cash right away because of the holiday, so he would cash the check and pay everybody off. At the corner saloon, we discovered that Mr. Latov had indeed cashed a check for over 600 dollars that morning, that he had then had a drink or two and left.

When we brought this story back to the workers in the shop, all hell broke loose. But in all the excitement, Mr. Goldstein disappeared. At first, the men refused to leave the place. After discussing the matter backward and forward, we finally decided to leave a committee of two volunteers in the shop to see that the finished work was not removed from the premises. The watchman told us he had overheard Latov telling Goldstein that he was celebrating the Passover *Seder* at his father-in-law's. That evening we split up into groups and made the rounds of every synagogue in the area to see if we could find out where Latov's father-in-law lived. In a little synagogue on East Broadway, we discovered what we wanted to know.

The next night, the night of the second *Seder* (traditional Passover ceremony around the table), a group of us went to a house on Attorney Street and without even knocking, burst in and surrounded Latov as he sat around the table with his family. He couldn't have looked more surprised if Elijah himself had walked in. He sat speechless, his *Haggadah* in hand. His wife, who

recognized several of the workers, finally cried out:

"For heaven's sake, friends, what's the matter? What's happened?"

One of the pressers, Itche Garber, past all patience, grabbed her arm and tried to pull off a gold bracelet she was wearing. With the other hand, he ripped her necklace. She screamed, the children began to yammer, and Latov at last found his voice.

"Brothers, friends, please, a terrible thing happened to me. On the way to the shop with the checks two men attacked me and robbed me . . . but please wait, after the holiday. . . ."

"After the holiday!" Itche Garber exploded. "We want our money now! You can tell that phony story to your father-in-law! Pay us our money now or we'll give you what's coming to you right here and now! You won't get away with the same stunt you pulled three years ago!"

Latov, frightened, took out his wallet. "Here, take what I have . . it's all I've got now . . . three hundred. . . . Goldstein will pay you the balance next week. . . ."

But when we came into the shop after the holiday, we found, not Goldstein, but the same Latov, pacing back and forth, and tearing his hair. His partner had swindled him out of half the money they had stolen from the men; he had taken the 300 dollars, sold the machines and the pressing-irons and . . . vanished.

We never got the rest of our money.

CHAPTER 18

A Tailor With a Pince-Nez

ON THE BOWERY there was once a shop that belonged to a man named Kovalsky. One day, Kovalsky received a letter from a rabbi asking if he would please find jobs for two young men, his *landsleit,* who had just arrived in America. The rabbi emphasized that the two young men "came from a good family." Kovalsky found places for them in his shop and the next day they came to work. Their names were David and Jacob.

When they walked into the shop, there was a stir among the workers. Both of them wore pince-nez, white collars and black bow ties, and long, black, curly hair. The women sat and stared. The men burst out laughing. And the loudest guffaw came from Kovalsky.

"Certainly our rabbi must have made a mistake!" he laughed. "He probably wants you to learn to be *shochtim,* (those who kill poultry and cattle according to the Jewish tradition), not tailors! He sent you to the wrong place!"

One of the young men hastened to explain that the rabbi had not made a mistake, that in the old country they had both worked for Chayim, the Tailor, and that now they were anxious to learn to operate "the Singer." "The rabbi is our uncle," he added.

As was the custom in those days, we soon crowned them with nicknames. David was called "The Screwball." The Yiddish theater was then running a popular play of

Jacob Gordin's called "Der M'turef," which means a zany, mixed-up scatterbrain, and since David had let slip his plan of studying engineering at night while he worked in the shop during the day, we concluded he was a "screwball." His brother Jacob, who wrote verse, we named Lazer the Bard, after a character in another of Gordin's plays.

In the beginning, both of them came to work every morning with books under their arms: In those days, books were almost "verboten" in the shops. Many bosses assumed that all books were full of agitation for strikes and revolution. Eventually, Mr. Kovalsky, too, became "nervous" and when he was told one day that the title of a book David was reading was "The Prince and the Pauper," he raised a fuss and our two "intellectuals" had to be more cautious.

But one day, the foreman informed Mr. Kovalsky that Jack, formerly Jacob, had a book hidden in his work-basket. Kovalsky, incensed at this violation of the rules, ran over to Jack's machine and dumped the contents of the basket onto the floor. But there was no book. Suddenly the foreman clapped his forehead. "Of course! It's not here! He's sitting on it!" And he pushed Jack off his chair. He was right. There *was* a book, wrapped in pieces of cloth; a big book, about two inches thick. Kovalsky turned the pages angrily, and his face grew redder and redder; then he threw a murderous look at the foreman, tossed the book aside and stalked out of the room. It was a sample-book — a book of patterns, styles and swatches, which Jack had put on his seat to work his machine more comfortably.

Some time later, Jack suddenly "disappeared" from the shop. It was rumored that he went to Poland to join the theater. David, the Screwball, however, stayed on. By day

he worked and by night he studied. We didn't know what he was studying or where and he didn't volunteer any information. Not that you could blame him. Some of the other men did their best to make life unbearable for this "screwball intellectual."

One day a rumor came from the Pig Market that one of the operators at Kovalsky's "is studying for doctor." The workers in the shop then carried on such an inquisition that David finally confessed. He had given up his idea of becoming an engineer and was studying medicine.

That was all they needed. David became the butt of all their jokes. Whenever anyone stuck his finger with a pin he would go running to David: "Herr Doctor! Please bandage my finger!" Mr. Kovalsky's favorite stunt was to take a rubber hose off an iron and put it in David's ear like a stethescope.

David accepted it all good-naturedly and went on with his studies.

Finally, he too "disappeared" from the shop. A few years passed. The "Brotherhood of Tailors" began an organizing campaign. The workers at Kovalsky's began to talk about unions and better conditions. The best organizer in the shop was Elya, the presser, who was doing a good job in convincing the other pressers to join the union. One day his "success" got under Kovalsky's skin and the boss ordered him out of the shop. Some of the other pressers refused to let Elya be fired. There was an argument and words turned to blows. One of the men had his head split. The foreman lost a couple of teeth. Mr. Kovalsky had a black eye. Shirley, the bookkeeper, lost no time and called the police *and* an ambulance.

The ambulance doctor was a young, slender man with a black satchel who got right to work as though he knew

his way around the place blindfolded. We all recognized him at once. "David, the screwball!"

Dr. David Friedman finished with his iodine and bandages and said to Mr. Kovalsky: "Wait a moment!" He reached over a table for an iron and pulled off the hose. With one end in his ear and the other end on Kovalsky's chest, he said: "Now I'll find out whether you really have a heart or not!"

Dr. Friedman later opened an office on Henry Street and became a very popular doctor. People said he rarely charged tailors for treatment. . . .

CHAPTER 19

The Mother Who Picketed Her Son

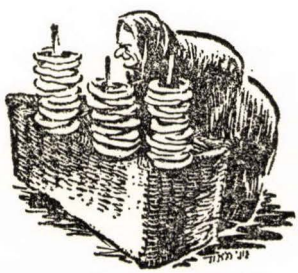
ON GREENE STREET there was a shop owned by a Mr. Green. When the tailors on the Pig Market had occasion to mention "Green of Greene Street," they shuddered.

Green lived in his own home across the river in Brooklyn. In the springtime, on days when there wasn't too much doing in the shop, or even after a hard day's work, Mr. Green's workers were expected to go out to his home and work in his garden. Or whenever he and his wife went out in the evening, one of the finishers had to travel to Brooklyn to "sit" with their children. And each presser, in his turn, had to come into the shop a little earlier to shake the ashes out of the stove and get the place warm. Mr. Green once presented an old overcoat to an employee as a gift. Six months later, the man took a better job in another shop. As he was leaving, Mr. Green yanked the coat off his back and cut it to ribbons with shears.

That was Mr. Green. But at times he was also a benefactor. He decided one day that it was time to bring his family over to America. And he didn't stint; he bought "ship-tickets" for his mother, several brothers and sisters, a brother-in-law and two cousins. The workers in his shop knew what to expect. One after another, he brought his relatives into the shop. The old workers had to train each one of them. As soon as the greenhorn was

ready to take over, the old worker was fired. In a few months, the entire family was working in Mr. Green's shop. Only a few of the previous hands remained. But Mr. Green was impartial, you have to say that for him. The members of his family received no better wages than the "outsiders."

Then Max Green, the youngest brother, happened to pass by a union hall on Clinton Street and he stopped to listen to the tailors talking about the union. He liked what he heard. So when he discovered that the following evening there was going to be an organizing meeting, he told his cousins. The three of them went to the meeting and were astounded to find one of the sisters and another brother. There was a family conclave and they all joined the union.



On the "Picketline"

In the morning, when they came in to work, they found Mr. Green storming around the shop like a wounded tiger. When his sister Mierel came in, however, he sprang at her, waving his fists and screaming and cursing:

"You should all have sunk to the bottom of the ocean! Is this why I paid for "ship-tickets" and gave you all jobs? So you could make a stinking union in my shop!"

His sister Mierel, who was usually very soft-spoken,

answered him in no uncertain terms. "Is this why you brought us to America, to be your personal slaves? You're not a brother, you're an overseer! But you won't get away with it! We refused to bow to Tsar Nikolai and we won't bow to you!"

"So now I'm Tsar Nikolai! You trollop! I'll teach you to behave!" He reached out and caught her by the hair and in a moment she was in the center of a free-for-all as her family came to her rescue.

When the excitement subsided, Mr. Green, nursing a bloody nose, stood at the sink bellowing at them to sit down and start the day's work. But all the workers looked at each other silently, put on their coats and walked out in a body.

In the evening, the family met at their mother's. As she listened to their story she grew more and more furious. "To think that that—boor—that ignoramus—should lay a finger on my Mierele!"

As they sat in the "front room" discussing this thorny problem, the boss himself came to "visit" his mother. For an embarrassed moment, he stood not knowing what to do with himself, shifting from one foot to the other, until his mother took him by the arm and led him into the kitchen.

The rest of them sat gloomy and silent for a minute or two when suddenly there was a loud screech from the kitchen: "Out of my house, you scoundrel! You animal! You dare call my Mierele dirty names! You're not worth her little finger! You can keep your filthy three dollars! I'd rather stand all day on Suffolk Street and sell bagels than depend on you and your money!"

The next day, when the union declared a strike against Mr. Green's shop, his mother sat down on the bottom

step of the building and refused to let anyone up. On the second day she was there again and when the policeman asked her what she was doing and how long she was going to sit there, she took a photograph from her coat-pocket and showed it to him: "You see this? This is a picture of me and my family. See him? That's my son, Mr. Green, upstairs. I'm going to sit here until the strike is over. I have to make sure no harm comes to him. . . ."

CHAPTER 20

Thanks To His Boss, He Became A Cantor

NECESSITY OFTEN BRINGS families closer together. Thus it was a necessity, during the early immigrant years, that created the ties between *landsleit* and led them to help each other in time of need. Most of the immigrants came here without a plan and without a trade, and they had to help one another earn a living.

With this hope Mayerke, Label the Shochet's son, came to America. There was no other escape for him from the privation and poverty of his *shtetl* in the old country. Before he bid farewell to his parents and brothers and sisters his father had lectured him:

"I know only too well that you will hardly become a rabbi in America, but our *landsleit* will not desert you. They'll help you find a livelihood, and maybe with a fine voice like yours you can even become a *chazzan*" (a Cantor).

At this point Yosl-Yankl the Shoemaker, who had been in America but returned, began to list the opportunities that would open up for Mayerke if he were actually to become a cantor.

"With a throat like yours, you'll be able to make a dollar over there. In America a *chazzan* is not like with us here. There you not only get paid for *davenen* (praying). You can make good money there by singing at a wedding, a *bris,* a bar mitzvah. They even pay well for a *moleh* (prayer for the dead). A cantor there can sing in

a theater, at a concert, a reception, or any other kind of *simcha.*"

"Besides," added Yosl-Yankl, "they have a custom in America, that when the Jewish people go to the country or the seashore for vacation, the *chazzan* goes with them. He learns a few theater-songs, a folksong or two, he learns how to make a little speech and tell a joke, and one-two-three — he's a real star. Then he can make the rounds from Lakewood to Atlantic City, to the mountains, and even to Miami. Wherever there are Jews who like to hear a real Jewish melody he can find something to do. And they pay well. The money flows like water. Especially among the people who have worked their way up and want to have a good time. Money is no object. . ."

After listening to all these prophecies. Label the Shochet sat down and wrote a letter to his *landsman* Nochem-Elya, the ex-butcher of the *shtetl* who was now a bit of a manufacturer in New York. (He owned a contracting shop in the men's clothing trade.) Label asked him to help his son Mayer find a job and get settled. From his townsmen who had been in America, Label had learned that Nochem-Elya was good to his *landsleit,* even to the point of giving them jobs in his own shop and teaching them a trade.

With this letter in his pocket, Mayerke arrived in America full of hope. He was welcomed at the dock by his cousin Shloimeh, who took him into his home. At the very first meal Mayer began to tell his cousin the whole story of how Yosl-Yankl the Shoemaker had encouraged him to become a cantor in America, and he showed him the letter of introduction which his father, Label, had written to Nochem-Elya the ex-butcher now a contractor.

"Sure. Sure. Nochem-Elya can help you a lot. He'll take you into his shop like he does all his other *landsleit.* But if you want to stay alive, don't mention the word 'butcher' in his hearing. He may have been a butcher in the old country but here he's an *alrightnik,* a regular boss. He does his *landsleit* a favor, that's true, but he's also learned the trick of skinning them alive. He does teach the greenhorns a trade, but before they begin to make a dollar they can die of hunger."

Mayer did not fully understand his cousin's words. "What do you mean, he'll teach me a trade? My father wants me to become a cantor. I have a good voice, thank God. For eight years I've been helping my father in the synagogue services, and Yosl-Yankl promised that in America a *chazzan* can make a lot of money."

Shloimeh reassured him. "Don't worry, Mayerke. In time you'll *be* somebody here. But meanwhile you mustn't forget that everything here is strange to you. Greenhorns have to suffer a little bit first. Later," he laughed, "if things go well for you, that's good. If not, you suffer some more. . . ."

But nevertheless, Shloimeh had a plan. "First thing, you go see Nochem-Elya and let him teach you a trade. When you start earning some money and buy yourself some decent clothes and find yourself a place to live, then you'll start studying music. Then maybe you'll find a position with a cantor or a choir and even get a few dollars for your talent. Gradually you'll become known. But take your time. . ."

So the next morning Mayerke was taken to Nochem-Elya's shop, where his *landsleit* greeted him with a warm *sholem-aleichem* and he responded with news from home. Nochem-Elya read Label's letter two or three times and

swelled with importance. Such a prominent and respected citizen of the shtetl as Label the Shochet was practically begging him – the ex-butcher – to do something for his son!

Nochem-Elya called Gedalia the Presser over and asked him to read the letter aloud to the workers in the shop. After it was read, he took the letter slowly from Gedalia's hand, folded it carefully and placed it gently into his breast-pocket. Then he made a loud, public announcement:

"Gedalia! Take Mayerke under your wing and make a presser out of him! A rabbi he won't become here, but a good presser we'll make him!"

In a few weeks Mayer had learned the work and was making the grand sum of six dollars a week. One day his cousin Shloimeh showed him an advertisement in the paper requesting singers to try out for a synagogue choir for the High Holidays. Mayerke went to the audition, was accepted, and made a "contract" with the cantor. He began studying his part in a fervor of dedication. He had a feeling that his father's dreams for him would soon be realized. Wherever he was, at home, at work, in bed, at the table, Mayer rehearsed. The *landsleit* with whom he boarded glowed with pride at his wonderful voice. But the neighbors soon protested. He kept them awake nights with his rehearsing. He promised to stop, but he no longer had the power to do so. He very quickly forgot his promise and the tones burst forth from his throat before he could stop them.

One day as he stood in the shop with the hot iron in his hand, smoothing out the creases in a coat, he began to muse over the days when he had sung with his father. He began to chant in his father's style, with all the pathos

and emotion that goes with the ancient Hebrew prayers. He began softly, gradually increased the vigor of his tones; he shut his eyes and threw his head back, and soon a heart-rending lament filled every corner of that gloomy sweatshop. He felt as though everyone in the shop had joined the choir and was helping him sing.

Suddenly the foreman's yell put an abrupt end to Mayer's chant. "Mayer! Dammit! You burned that coat! You green pickle! What are you—a presser or a *chazzan?*"

Nochem-Elya came running like an enraged beast. He swore at Mayer in a series of low insults. Mayer, sensing that it was his father's honor that was really being degraded here, found the courage to defy his boss.

"Nochem-Elya, you're a butcher, but I'm not an ox! I'll pay you for the damage to the coat, but don't scream your dirty insults at *me!*"

This infuriated Nochem-Elya even more. Such effrontery from a greenhorn! He tore the iron out of Mayer's hand and shoved him toward the door. "I don't need singers! I need pressers! Get the hell out of here, you lousy greenhorn!"

Mayer came home that evening in low spirits and told his cousin how Nochem-Elya had practically thrown him bodily out of the shop. Shloimeh tried to console him but in the middle of one of his soothing sentences he stopped and sat up suddenly as though he had been awakened from sleep by a brilliant thought.

"Mayerke! You'll be somebody even sooner than you hoped! Last week at our landsmanshaft meeting, we decided that this year we *must* have our own chazzan for the High Holidays. A *baal-tfilah* (the leader of the prayers) is not enough. If we have our own chazzan, more of

our *landsleit* will join the Society. We'll sell more tickets for the shul and have a bigger congregation. . ."

Mayer's face began to shine and he broke into ecstatic song. The next day Shloimeh brought him the good tidings. The Society had voted unanimously and enthusiastically to engage Mayer, Label the Shochet's son, as their cantor. And not only for Rosh Hashonah and Yom Kippur, but for the Sabbath and holidays the whole year round.

Mayer, full of resolute ambition, immediately went to see his cantor and asked forgiveness for having to break their contract. Then he began to prepare himself for his debut. The *landsleit* busily went to work selling tickets. When Gedalia the Presser handed two tickets to Nochem-Elya the Boss, the latter worthy almost went into hysterics.

"What! That clumsy greenhorn! That bum of a presser! He's going to pray for a good year for *me?* Some good year I'll have! I'm not going to this shul!"

Gedalia and some of the older workers laughed out loud.

"Why shouldn't he pray for you?" Gedalia insisted. "Didn't you make him what he is today? If you hadn't thrown him out of your shop he would still be sweating over the pressing-iron like we are!" Gedalia thumped him familiarly on the shoulder. "Nochem-Elya, listen. We're *landsleit* aren't we? Don't behave like a fool! Buy the tickets. *Your* good year is already assured anyway. Besides, you're a member in good standing of the Society. One day Mayer may have to deliver a eulogy over you. After all, you're human too. Today your eyes devour everything they see, but tomorrow you close them. . ."

CHAPTER 21

Shenanigans with a Clock

ON SPRING STREET there was a shop that belonged to a man named Wallach. Among the workers in the shop was a *landsman* of Wallach's, a Mr. Barken, who came here in 1908 from Poland. Wallach, for some reason or other, became obsessed with the idea of making Barken a partner in the business.

Barken, however, was not too keen on the plan and resisted Wallach's proposal for a long time. Barken was a well-read, cultured young man. Whenever he came into the Pig-Market, (Hester Park) he loved to talk to the crowds of workers about the terrible conditions in the sweatshops; the impression he gave was that his heart bled not so much for himself as for the thousands of other slaves.

Imagine my astonishment, therefore, when one day Barken suddenly began to talk to me out of the other side of his mouth. Gradually, he revealed his secret: he was going to become a partner in Wallach's corporation. His arguments for entering the corporation sounded very much to me like those of the nobleman in old Russia who, when he saw a group of naked children lying in the snow, ordered his coachman to drive faster, because he could not bear the sight of children freezing to death. Barken tried to convince me he was becoming a partner because he could no longer bear to watch the "ignorant workers" allowing themselves to be exploited.

It didn't take long for Barken to display his talents. He left the work-table and became a boss on the floor. He began to institute new methods and the other partners put no obstacles in his way. They knew they could depend on him.

One day, the workers noticed that the clock was losing time. Some of them joked that it was slowing up with old age. But then they began to notice that at other times it was fast. The same wags gave it as their considered opinion that the clock was trying to get in some overtime.

It didn't take too long, however, to figure out that this was one of Barken's "inventions." In the morning, he would put the clock ahead about 10 minutes. After lunch he would put it back about 15 minutes. The pressers, who worked by the week, began quietly to protest against the extra time they were putting in for nothing. They demanded a new clock.

Barken quipped that the clock was still good, but "a clock is like a human being, at certain times during the day it doesn't feel so good and slows up its pace." The pressers, however, were not amused, and decided to reply in kind. They agreed among themselves that each man would turn out only 15 coats a day, instead of the 17 or 18 which was their normal production.

On the second day of the "slowdown," Mr. Barken caught on and went screaming to his partner, Wallach, in a voice heard all through the shop: "Mr. Wallach, dock the pressers for every coat under 17 and if they don't like it, they can get the hell out of here!"

Among the pressers was a Yankel Kapushnik, an expert craftsman who never hesitated to say what was on his mind. When Barken made his public announcement,

Yankel put down his iron, tossed the coat he was working onto the table and ran over to Mr. Barken.

The whole shop seemed to lean forward expectantly, anticipating a fight. But Yankel Kapushnik only laughed, and being by nature somewhat of a stammerer, said haltingly to Barken and Wallach:

"You understand . . . a man . . . is like a clock . . . In the morning . . . he's fresh and strong . . . and works faster. Later in the day . . . he weakens a little . . . doesn't feel so good . . . can't press as many coats. . . ."

Everybody burst out laughing; even Barken couldn't restrain himself.

* * *

Another incident in this same shop, however, was not so funny. One of the finishers was a woman named Rose, who had been married 16 years and now, for the first time, had become pregnant. She was the happiest woman in the world.

As she went into the advanced months, she found it more and more difficult to do her work. But she refused to stop working, even though the kibbitzers used to tease the life out of her: "Your baby is already an experienced finisher! . . . Your little girl is already playing with buttons!"

Rose would laugh good-humoredly. Her home depended on her earnings; she could not yet afford to give them up.

One morning, Rose didn't feel at all well. "If it wasn't payday today," she told her co-workers, "I wouldn't have come in." Soon it became apparent that she was in great pain. The other women finally persuaded her to go home and call the doctor. She removed her apron and began to pack her things, but when Barken noticed this, he stopped

her. "You've got to finish that bundle! I have to send it out today or you won't get paid! Finish this one and that's all, then you can go!"

Rose put her thimble on her finger and went back to her sewing. Her pains became more frequent and more intense. Suddenly her scream filled the shop. We sat horror stricken. An old Italian woman sprang up, quickly cleared a table, bedded it with rags and scraps and hung a piece of canvas around it. Rose was carried to the "bed."

In a little while her husband came with a doctor who ordered everybody away and began to deliver the child. But it was too late. The baby was dead.

The old woman wailed accusingly at Barken: "You no good, you killed her baby! You no good! You no good!"

CHAPTER 22

Wolf, the Spitter

WOLF & BLINKEY had a shop on Grand Street. The place looked like a stable, but dirtier. A stable is cleaned from time to time; Mr. Wolf, however, boasted that his shop was so busy he had not had the opportunity to sweep the floor in seven years.

Beneath the tables lay pieces of bread, chicken-bones and other leftovers which even the mice and cockroaches, of which there were plenty, refused to touch. They preferred to come up on the tables for something better.

Mr. Blinkey was a quiet man. He would stand at his table examining the work, always buried deep within his own thoughts. The workers around him felt free to talk or grab a bite to eat while they were working. And eating meant losing time. Because the moment you put down a piece of food there was an immediate assembly of ants, flies and cockroaches. For every bite you attempted to take you had first to repulse an attack of the enemy.

When Mr. Blinkey sat down to the meal which Mrs. Blinkey brought him every day, she had to stand guard at his side and drive away the insects. She defended the plate of sour cream or chicken soup, so that the cockroaches had to go elsewhere to forage.

Mr. Wolf, the other partner, was just the opposite of quiet Mr. Blinkey. He was the real boss. He used to eat his lunch out, and in the half-hour he was out of the

shop, the workers, and even his partner, breathed more easily.

All day long, Mr. Wolf, or as the men dubbed him — "The Spitter" — would chase around the shop like a . . . wolf. In the center of the room stood a large stove. Whenever he passed this stove he would spit nastily at it through his teeth. The stove became covered with "dimes," as the men used to call them. When he was angry, however, he spit wherever he happened to be standing, and not "dimes," but gobs the size of quarters.

And Mr. Wolf was quick to anger. His ire was roused particularly by a worker coming in a few minutes late in the morning, or by the sound of someone talking during working hours.

The shop was really his primary home. He came in every morning at six. From 6 to 6:45 he stood like a doorman and greeted each arrival. But woe betide the worker who came in after 6:45 — he was greeted by a curse and the disgusting smack of spit on the floor. The same thing happened at lunch-time. Mr. Wolf himself went out to eat first. Then he would return and stand by the door, waiting for those men who ate outside the shop.

Once, as he stood at the door waiting for his victims, a fireman in civilian clothes came to inspect the fire-escapes. Mr. Wolf mistook him for a new employee and gave him a dressing-down (including spit) for coming in late. The fireman flashed his badge and invited the red-faced Mr. Wolf to lead the way to his office.

Afterwards, Blinkey laughed uproariously whenever he told the story. "That was one time it cost Wolf five dollars to spit!"

In this same shop, there was a finisher named Lena

who had been working there from the first day Wolf & Blinkey had opened their doors. Here she met Benny Lapidus, a lining-maker. In due course, Benny bought a diamond-ring from the peddler "to pay out" and he and Lena became engaged and set a date for the wedding.

One morning, as Lena was hurrying on her way to work, a man stopped her and asked if she knew where he could find a pawnshop. He began to tell her a story about having to go to California immediately to attend his brother's funeral. He had just learned what the fare was, he said, and realized that he didn't have enough cash for the ticket. He was in a tight spot, and his only hope was to pawn the expensive ring he was wearing. He would even sell it, he said, for any price, because attending this funeral was the most important thing in the world to him.

In the middle of pouring out his troubles, he stopped another passer-by and asked him, too, if he could direct him to a pawnshop. He showed him the ring and told him the same story he had told Lena. The second man looked carefully at Lena and asked her conspiratorially whether she understood Polish. Lena nodded. He then told her, in Polish, that if she wanted to "go partners" with him, they could, together, buy the man's ring. He had only 80 dollars with him, he said, which was not enough, but if she could add something to the amount, they could probably make the deal.

Lena opened her handbag and counted out 25 dollars which she had been saving for a "ship-ticket" to bring her sister to America. Her "partner," still speaking in Polish, then proposed to her that since the man's ring was obviously worth at least 800 dollars, the 105 dollars in cash would still not be enough. But if she would add the ring

she was wearing, that ought to satisfy the stranger sufficiently to give up his own ring, which was certainly worth a lot more. To show his good faith, he suggested that Lena take the man's ring home with her; later that evening he would come to her home and divide the profit with her. Then, speaking in Yiddish, he made the offer to the California-bound "mourner." That unfortunate individual was somewhat reluctant, but pressed by circumstances, he finally agreed and took the 105 dollars and Lena's ring in exchange for his obviously much more valuable "rock." Then, looking frantically at his watch, he muttered something about missing his train and turned to leave. The second man clucked sympathetically: "May you know no more of sorrow" and Lena, her heart touched, thrust her lunch bag impulsively into his hands "to eat on the journey."

Lena's partner then suggested that he go into a candy-store for a piece of paper so he could write down her name and address. "Wait here just a moment," he said, and disappeared around the corner.

As she watched him go, Lena suddenly felt her blood turn cold in apprehension. She ran to the nearest pawnshop.

"How much is this ring worth?" she asked, holding out the rock.

"Who gave you this ring?" asked the man unbelievingly.

"My fiance," said Lena lamely.

"It's glass," he laughed. "A *big* piece of glass, but glass all the same!"

Wringing her hands hysterically, Lena ran all the way to the shop. Here, Mr. Wolf spit a few choice oaths at

her and fired her without allowing her a word of explanation.

When Benny, her intended, heard the fate of his diamond ring, which was not even paid for yet, he broke the engagement.

Lena had lost her job, her engagement ring, and her boy-friend—all in one day. . . .

CHAPTER 23

"Joe Penny"

SHENKER & SON ran a shop on Spring Street. The father, Harry Shenker, was an elderly, educated and pious man with a goatee. When he talked, he often threw in a quotation from the Torah or other learned parable. His one and only son was a churlish ruffian known on the East Side as "Joe Penny." This seemingly innocent name he got from his practice of waylaying children on their way to the candy-store and confiscating their pennies. When he grew up and refused to attend school, his father took him into the business to make a floor boy out of him.

All of us in the shop feared him. He was constantly borrowing small sums of money from the workers and "forgetting" to pay them back. When Harry Shenker began to feel the signs of old-age and ill-health, he decided to give his son more responsibility in the shop. The floor boy became foreman. Exercising his rights as foreman, Joe began to "borrow"—civilly or threateningly—larger and larger sums out of the workers' meager pay for his gambling and drinking bouts. In addition, he had a nasty habit of annoying the women who worked in the shop, and not only in his own shop, but throughout the building. The police and the courts were always after him. Many a morning, he came in to work with a black eye.

His father died of shame a thousand times, hearing

what people were saying about his son's nasty deeds. But, nevertheless, whenever anyone complained to Mr. Shenker personally about Joe, he always took his son's part.

Once, however, old man Shenker lost his patience and in the presence of the workers in the shop began to upbraid him: "What did I do to deserve you? I brought you up decently and wanted to educate you, to make something of you. School wasn't for you, you said. I took you into the business. I made you the foreman. I'm paying you three times what you're worth. I make the lawyers rich paying for the misery you cause me in my old age. Where is your respect for me? And now the last straw! The gall of him! To go to the manufacturer behind my back and try to open his own shop! You want to compete with your own father? Who do you think I've been working for all my life? You think I want to take the shop with me to my grave?"

Joe lowered his head in shame, probably the first time in his life he had ever done so. But immediately he turned and took his frustration out on us.

Several days later, Joe did not come in to work. Mr. Shenker asked one of the men to look after things because Joe, he said, was sick and could not come in.

The rumor around the shop was that Joe's "sickness" was really serious this time and that he would not be "cured" of it for a long time. In addition to the morals charges he faced, he had recently been involved in a hold-up in the same building. He had been implicated by one of the stick-up men who said Joe had given them the tip and had served as lookout during the hold-up.

That evening, Joe came into the shop looking harassed and pale as a sheet. In his hour of trouble, he had finally come to his father for "advice." "Pop, I have to talk with

you about something important; do you have a minute?" He looked almost beseechingly at the old man, who was working at a fitting-table.

Harry Shenker straightened up proudly and with joy shining from his wrinkled countenance, said to the fitter: "You see, Philip, I gave him a good scolding, so he changed his attitude!" And to Joe he said fondly: "Wait just a second, son, and we'll talk in the office."

They had not been in the office long, however, when a detective came into the shop and asked for Joe Shenker. Two minutes later he escorted Joe out of the office in handcuffs. The poor old man broke down and sobbingly kept asking the detective what Joe had done.

"I've been looking for your son for three days, Mr. Shenker. He hasn't been in his rooms for the last two nights. He knows what he's wanted for, don't you, Joe?"

"But he's making an honest living here in the shop . . . he's my foreman . . . I need him to run the business. . . ."

"You can tell all that to the judge, Mr. Shenker," the detective said, as he walked out of the door with Joe.

A few weeks later, Harry Shenker sold the shop and was taken to the hospital. On the same day, "Joe Penny" began serving his three years in jail. . . .

CHAPTER 24

Child Labor in the Sweatshops

MOST OF THE JEWISH immigrants were swept into the needle-trades —not only the men, but entire households. To pay for the "ship-tickets," to alleviate the poverty and want, it was not enough to take in borders into your already crowded quarters; you had to harness the hands of your children too.

There *was* a law against child-labor on the books. A boy or girl of 16 had to get "working papers" in order to quit school and go to work. But all the immigrants had had plenty of old-country experience in "faking" the age of their children, either up or down. So it was that many 12- and 14-year-old children, of both sexes, were "accelerated" into the sweatshops. There was a saying among the immigrants: "If I only had ten or twelve children I could open up my own little shop. . . ."

Mr. Bobrick was one of these lucky ones with a houseful of nine children. There was only 7 years difference between the oldest and the youngest. (Two sets of twins.) All the children worked in the shop with their father, even the one with the crippled hand who earned a few pennies a day by running errands for the men in the shop.

Mr. Bobrick kept the door to his establishment locked at all times, in order to keep out truant officers. He was constantly paying graft to one official or another on this account. But the best preventive was, of course, not to get caught red-handed violating the law, hence the locked

door. At least it gave him a fighting chance to "hide the evidence."

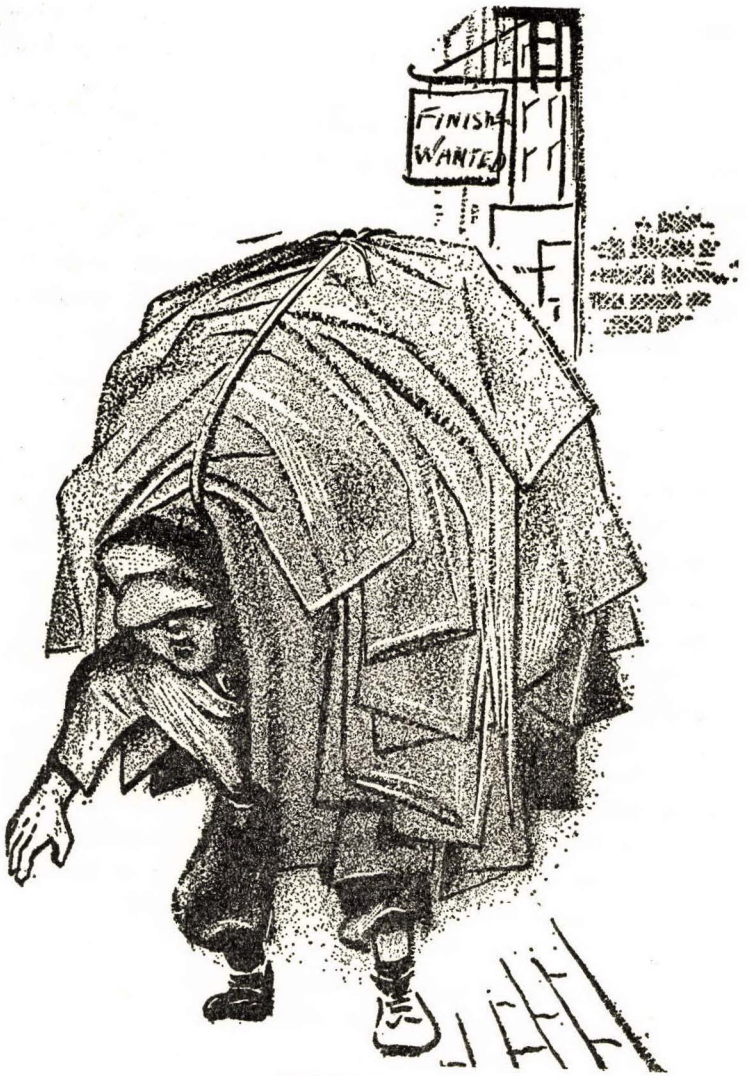
Once, one of his children while looking out of the window, spotted an officer approaching the shop. "Pa, someone's coming!" he cried in alarm.

Bobrick kept the door locked until his "kindergarten" had time to conceal themselves in the "ratholes" of the shop. When he opened the door to let the officer in, he grew more flustered than ever. The man at the door was an officer of the Fire Department, who had come to inspect the premises. The locked door in his "factory," which was a serious violation of the Safety Code, cost Bobrick a pretty penny.

Another time, it was the examiner of the firm for whom Bobrick was contracting who was kept waiting outside the locked door. But the examiner was less patient than the fire inspector and walked away before the door could be opened. This, too, cost Bobrick money, in the shape of additional orders which the examiner eventually gave to another contractor.

* * *

It is almost impossible for people today to comprehend the conditions of "homework" under the sweatshop system of 50 years ago. One of the main reasons for the spread of the "homework" system was the smallness of the sweatshop itself. Most of the shops, or "shopkes" (little shops, as we called them), were small, crowded and dirty. The machines crowded them even more. The number of workers required was at least three or four times as great as would be used today for the same output of work. Everything was done by hand—buttonholes, buttons, pressing, basting, tacking, padding—almost every single operation that went into the making of the garment. This made it



Child Laborer

possible to do the work at home. So there were many women who took home "bundles" and put their entire households to work.

Mostly it was the Italian women who engaged in this homework. There was also a large number of Jewish women in this occupation, but many of them were ashamed to admit it. They never learned the trick of carrying the bundles of work atop their heads through the streets, as was the custom among the Italian women. The contractor usually had to send the work directly to the Jewish women into their tenements.

When you walked through the Italian quarter you would find hundreds of women skillfully carrying heavy bundles on their heads. And their arms were full of more bundles, or bags of groceries, or new babies. A ten-block walk with this load was nothing unusual. Then there were the steps up to the shops and down, and up to their flats.

These tenement flats, housing large families in their cramped, dimly-lit rooms, were turned into "workshops." Every sweatshop had one or more of these sub-shops doing homework. When I first started working, one of my duties was to go and fetch special bundles of finished garments from these home workshops. I thus had plenty of opportunity to observe the terrible scenes of poverty, filth and squalor which were commonplace in the tenements.

On the stove, pots of food cooked and gurgled. The penetrating odors of oils and spices assailed the nostrils and made your eyes smart. On the floor lay the bundles of work, spools of thread, shears and other tools. Surrounding these mounds of coats, vests and pants, on the floor, sat a group of children, those belonging to the

woman and maybe a few of the neighbors' in addition. Each child did some part of the work, according to his ability and his age. Tiny infants could also be seen, occasionally, warming themselves among the rags on the floor.

When a woman had to deliver her bundles of finished work to the main shop, she would leave her small children under the care of their "older" brothers and sisters. She would leave some food for the children to eat, usually on the dirty floor along with the dust and rags, exactly as one would throw scraps to animals in a barnyard. In one corner of the room, there would usually be a pail of water for drinking. Not far from the pail, you could



Homework

find another receptacle for the children's natural functions, because the toilet was out in the corridor and when mother went out she would lock the children in the flat.

Out of these conditions came many tragedies. One of these remains etched in my memory forever.

Angela was a homeworker for Gorelick's shop on Bleeker Street. She was the mother of four children, the oldest five years old. Her husband was a stonemason. One day as Angela was carrying home her big bundle of work from the shop, she was hit by an automobile. The driver blew his horn frantically, but Angela, with the heavy bundle on her head, could not get out of the way in time. She was taken unconscious to a hospital. At home, her children became hungry. They were locked in the flat. Apparently one of them tried to get something off the stove and accidently turned on one of the gas-jets. The four children fell asleep, huddled together like kittens. But their sleep was eternal.

Several hours later, when the police learned from the labels on the garments who Angela was and where she lived, it was too late. Angela died in the hospital of her injuries. Her husband? It is not recorded what happened that evening to a life of indescribable emptiness. . . .

CHAPTER 25

They Talked With Their Hands

ON HESTER STREET, there was a contracting shop that belonged to Kaufman "Mekeki." He got the name "Mekeki", because of his stammering. The workers in this shop had all the current troubles, but in addition they had a bit of fun.

Although Kaufman "Mekeki" normally had difficulty in speaking, his handicap vanished when he became angry. And he was angry from the moment he walked into the shop in the morning. His daughter was his bookkeeper as well as his "interpreter." It was she who communicated with the manufacturer, the designer or the examiner. But with the workers, it was "Mekeki" who did the talking, and quite often with his fists.

The workers in the trade were reluctant to take jobs at "Mekeki's" except as a last resort. All kinds of stories circulated about the conditions in that shop: this worker was beaten up, another wasn't paid his wages and was thrown down all the steps when he dared to ask for them. They said that one day "Mekeki" had passed a saloon and noticed one of his pressers having a drink with an official of the United Garment Workers' Union. He burst into the place and cracked the presser's head open with a beer schooner.

Once he pummelled a finisher so badly that for a moment we thought he was dead. But the attitude of slavery was so ingrained in that shop that when the

finisher came to, the first thing he did was crawl into the office and beg "Mekeki's" daughter to intercede with her father for his job.

Because of these "abilities and disabilities" of Kaufman "Mekeki", the following tragi-comic incident took place:

The shop was very busy and he needed another operator, so a couple of the workers went looking one Saturday at the Pig Market for a suitable applicant. It so happened that there was an operator out of work by the name of Big Moshke. He was a good worker, big, brawny and strong as an ox, but he had one handicap: he stammered.

Now I don't know whether it was a pure accident, or whether it was somebody's idea of a practical joke, but Big Moshke was given "Mekeki's" address and told to report for work on Sunday. Sunday morning, Moshke came into the shop and "Mekeki," in his own inimitable manner, began to ask him questions concerning his previous experience in the trade. Moshke replied to the best of his ability. "Mekeki," of course, jumped to the conclusion that Moshke was making fun of him. He flared up and began to splutter angrily. Moshke, in his turn, immediately assumed that "Mekeki" was imitating him. So he, too, grew furious and began to threaten "Mekeki" with his fists. The boss, not accustomed to having anyone raise a hand to him, grabbed up a piece of iron pipe and began to brandish it close to Moshke's head.

This was all Big Moshke needed. He clamped his left arm around "Mekeki" like a vise and with his right fist began to pound him like a punching-bag. "Mekeki" fell to the floor like a sheaf under the scythe.

When his daughter came in to work shortly thereafter and saw Kaufman "Mekeki" lying on the floor like a

dead man, she uttered a cry and seemed about to faint. Someone told her what had happened and she quickly recovered herself. She washed her father's wounds, bandaged him up and helped him into the office where he lay down on a bench.

Through all this, Moshke stood to one side and didn't move a hair. When Kaufman's daughter had finished ministering to her father, Moshke approached her in his near-mute manner and informed her that she owed him a half-day's wages. He wanted his money now. Otherwise, he declared, there would be more fists swinging. "People don't make fun of Moshke and get away with it!"

She went to the cashbox and brought out two dollars and that was the last time Kaufman "Mekeki" ever hit one of his workers.

CHAPTER 26

A Sour Boss with a Sweet Name

YOSEH TCHUKERKEH had a little shop on Catherine Street. His name was really Yosheh Slobodin, but the origin of his nickname is interesting, if you are willing to follow the details of the explanation. His wife, Gussie, was a *"Litvetchkeh"*—a female Litvak; that is she came from Lithuania. Now, Lithuanian Jews usually pronounce their S's like Sh and their Sh's like S. The Yiddish word for candy is *"tsukerkeh."* Yosheh was asthmatic and used to pop a candy into his mouth whenever he suffered a coughing spell. So, as you can see, it was his wife Gussie who unwittingly gave him the nickname of *"Yoseh Tchukerkeh."*

Gussie had been a widow whose husband had willed her the shop and everything in it. She herself had really managed the business. But after she married Yoseh, who had worked in the shop, she made him the boss. Naturally she still ran the business.

Yoseh was a short, fat man—a real "five-by-five." Despite his asthma he was a heavy smoker and would stand at his table all day with a cigarette in his mouth, puffing and coughing, coughing and puffing. Often he would be seized by such a severe coughing spell that the very walls of the building seemed to tremble. It was Gussie who started to feed him candy-drops to ease his coughing. Every day she would bring a bag of candy and empty it into the spacious pocket of his apron which he always

wore in the shop. As soon as he began to cough, Gussie would yell: "Yoseh, Yoseh, put a tchukerkeh in your mouth!"

It was not a very active shop. There was hardly a week, even in the busy season, when you could make a full week's pay at Yoseh Tchukerkeh's. Day and night workers would hang around the place waiting for an order to come in. When they weren't working, they played cards. The lunches which they brought were shared collectively. One man contributed his bread and radishes, another his herring, a third his pickles, and each man put in a penny for a pitcher of beer. Everyone drank from the same pitcher, of course, but not before he blew off his share of the "suds."

A few months after the great Tailors' Strike of 1913, Alter, the presser, came into the shop with a piece of news. He had heard at the Pig Market that the union was going to sign agreements only with those shops that had at least 10 sewing machines. The "shopkes" with less than 10 machines would be regarded as sweatshops and the union would not recognize them.

Yoseh had only eight machines. The men were disturbed. Despite the deplorable conditions in this shop, there were still a few workers around who did not particularly love unions and union regulations. Charlie, the finisher, exclaimed: "What is the union's lousy business how many machines are in a shop!" Hymie, another finisher, egged him on. "You don't know the half of it! The union will soon be telling us how many children to have and whether it should be a girl or a boy!"

Yoseh and Gussie were the most distressed of all. Gussie was in favor of getting two more machines and hiring "two green pickles" to learn to operate them. This

way they would be recognized by the union and avoid any trouble. But Yoseh was opposed. "It's dangerous to start dealing with a union. You give them a finger and they take your whole hand! We'll have to sign a contract, give them security, watch the hours, watch the pay. And you know what else I heard the union wants to get rid of the Pig Market! We'll have to hire workers from the union, did you ever hear such a crazy thing! Listen to me, Gussie, let's move the shop out of here altogether! We'll pick out a set that will stick with us and let the union go to hell!"

Gussie did not put up much opposition. That Friday evening, they packed up the machines, the pressing-irons, the bundles of work, and moved into the top floor above a livery stable on Monroe Street. In a few days, Yoseh had the new shop outfitted and quietly instructed a number of his operators where and when to report for work. The union tried for a few weeks to locate Yoseh but couldn't find him. Finally, we got a clue: The new shop was in a stable. So we sent out teams to look in stables. On Monroe Street, a neighbor told us that there had been some unusual activity in a stable in the middle of the block. We looked inside, but all we could find was one half-dead horse, a wagonload of junk and several pushcarts piled on top of each other. So we assumed either we were on the wrong trail or the "clue" was somebody's idea of a joke.

We tried another tack. Two of us supplied ourselves with bicycles. and stationed ourselves on 9th Street, outside the plant of a manufacturer who farmed out work to the "cockroach shops." When the expressman started out on his rounds to the shops, we followed him on our bicycles, noting the address with the intention of returning

to investigate each one. We had been following for about an hour when, lo and behold! we were back on Monroe Street outside the livery stable! The expressman took a few bundles out of his wagon, walked into the open door of the stable and disappeared somewhere inside.

This was obviously a situation that required reinforcements. At five o'clock in the morning we returned to the livery stable with two more union men and waited. At six, the operators began to arrive. We recognized some of them and began to talk with them. They did not seem sorry to see us.

"For God's sake, take us into the union! In the old place, we worked like horses, too, but here in this stable we're getting to live like them!"

When they went in to work we followed them. They entered one of the stalls and climbed up an ordinary ladder to a trap door in the attic. You had to bend almost in two to get into the opening. On the other side of the trap-door was a dark passageway that led to a step. Up the step was Yoseh Tchukerkeh's shop.

Our committee waited in the shop for almost an hour —it was like being buried alive. At seven o'clock Yoseh and Gussie arrived. When they came in, the only thing I could think of was: How in the world did that fat-belly get up the ladder and through the trap-door?

When she saw us waiting there to greet them, Gussie turned her wrath on her husband: "Well, Yoseh, what did I tell you! Here they are, the yoonie!"

Yoseh, still gasping for breath from his hard climb, began to cough uncontrollably. His face turned red as a beet.

"Yoseh, put a tchukerkeh in your mouth!" Gussie's voice rang through the whole stable.

"Yes, Yoseh," said one of our committee. "Take a tchukerkeh in your mouth and stop coughing. We have some business to discuss."

Our first demand was: "Move your shop out of the stable. Men are not horses!"

CHAPTER 27

Buffalo Bill

TWO YEARS BEFORE the formation of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers' Union, there were a number of shops in New York which had signed contracts with the United Garment Workers' Union. Formerly they were known as union shops, but the workers always referred to them as "Label Shops" because their unionism consisted only in the Union Labels which the bosses bought from the union and sewed into the garments.

One of these shops, on Houston Street, belonged to a Mr. Schneider. It was one of the larger sweatshops and was already equipped with steam-driven machines. The pressing-irons, too, were modern and heated by gas. But the shop itself looked like a steam-bath. The windows were always fogged and the rubber hoses of the irons quivered like the intestines of a slaughtered ox.

My Uncle Zalman, a presser helped me get my union-book in the United Garment Workers' Union and got me a job in this shop as an apprentice sleeve-maker. At the same time, he informed me that one of the better-paid skills was pocket-making and since I had had tailoring experience in the old country, I might eventually become a highly-paid worker.

So one day, when I wasn't particularly busy, I took "the privilege" of watching the pocket-makers at work. They worked in a set, under the leadership of a man known in the trade as "Buffalo Bill," who was a powerfully

strong man, big as a buffalo. As I stood watching the quick, skilled fingers of the pocket-makers, I was suddenly knocked off my feet by a buffalo-like clout on the side of the head. Apparently, I had violated one of Buffalo Bill's cardinal principles: looking where I wasn't supposed to, especially without his permission. I went home that evening battered and bruised, but determined to become a pocket-maker.

My co-workers advised me to press charges against Buffalo Bill at my union Local 156. The meetings of the local took place in the Forward Building on East Broadway.

The first meeting I attended terrified me. The chairman of the local was an obvious tippler. A squad of strong-arm men ran the meeting. When one old tailor—his name was Silberberg, and he had a shock of silver-white hair—stood up to complain about the ills and troubles of the men in the shops, the squad surrounded him and shoved him back into his seat. Hardly aware of what I was doing, I shouted, "Brothers, why don't you say something!"

Strangely enough, my words seemed to galvanize a lot of the men, who took up the cry: "Let him speak! Let him speak!"

I asked for the floor and the chairman, taken aback by the unwonted opposition, gave me permission to speak. My voice trembling, I "talked my heart out" and challenged, in conclusion: "Brothers, isn't it bad enough that we have to put up with strong-arm men in the shops? Do we have to come to our own union meetings to get beaten up, too?"

I could see the goon-squad at the front of the room

looking at each other uncertainly as if to say: "who the hell is this little snotnose anyway?"

On the night of the next meeting, when I arrived at the Forward Building, there was a "reception committee" waiting for me. The committee consisted of one "Louke Bum" who promptly proceeded to blacken both my eyes with his big fists. (This same Louke later became an honest worker and apologized to me every time he met me.)

With my eyes literally half-closed, but now wide-open to the dirty work in the union, I marched into the meeting and again demanded—and received—the floor to speak my piece. That same night, there were nominations for the Executive Board and I was one of those nominated. A week later, despite all the threats and all the swindling, and much to my own surprise, I was elected to the Executive Board of Local 156. And at the first meeting of the Executive Board, I was chosen to head the Grievance Committee! The chairman had apparently made his peace with the idea that the membership was also entitled to some representation. . . .

At the very first meeting of the Grievance Board, I almost fell "out of my chair" when it was announced that the first point on the agenda was a grievance against Buffalo Bill for working at night. A few minutes later, when the defendant himself was brought into the room, I had recovered most of my composure. Then it was his turn to be surprised. When he walked into the room and saw the little "greenhorn" sitting in the chairman's seat, he almost fainted.

It had been the practice of the union leaders to fine violators of union rules steeply and then treat themselves royally in the saloons on Orchard or Forsythe Street. So

Buffalo Bill fully expected to pay heavily for the punch he had landed on the chairman of the Grievance Committee. Imagine his amazement, then, when he heard me deliver an impassioned speech of protest against monetary fines!

After a heated debate, my motion passed: "The Grievance Committee rules that Brother Buffalo Bill shall attend every meeting of Local 156 for the next six months." In time, Buffalo Bill became a good union man.

Years later, when the shops had already been organized by the Amalgamated, this same Buffalo Bill bought into a corporation shop. The union tried to organize it and a fist fight took place in which Bill was severely bruised. He sued the union and several workers for damages. When the men appealed to him to withdraw the charges, offering to reimburse him for his medical expenses, he agreed on condition that I be the "arbitrator." If I advised him not to go to court, he would abide by my opinion.

At that time I had already been expelled from the union by A. Beckerman, the manager of the Amalgamated Joint Board and his gang, but when Pinny Pasikoff, who was then in the Organization Department of the Amalgamated, appealed to me, I accepted the assignment. I had a long talk with Buffalo Bill and he withdrew his charges.

CHAPTER 28

Dissatisfaction Under a Union Label

I HAVE ALREADY mentioned the "union labelism" of the United Garment Workers' Union. This organization encompassed the Brotherhood of Tailors which was formed in 1889 and the Jewish United Tailors' Union which was organized in 1886. The national office of the United Garment Workers' Union was in the Bible House, near Cooper Union, so the workers in the trade began to refer to the union as the "Bible House" and the name stuck.

The concern of the union leadership was mainly for the labels and hardly ever for the conditions under which the men worked. And conversely, the attitude of the New York tailors, most of whom were immigrants, toward the leadership, was one of suspicion. The general president of the union at that time was Tom Rickert, and the general secretary was B. A. Larger. Some of the leaders were Jewish, but the Jewish workers were looked down upon as greenhorns, and there was very little love lost between the leadership and the rank-and-file.

The business of the union labels became an obsession with some of the organizers, to the exclusion of everything else. In one shop, for instance, a business agent of the union once noticed a worker wearing a new coat. Almost instinctively he searched inside the coat for a union label. There was none. Whereupon he strode angrily to the man's machine, ripped off the spool of thread and exclaimed:

"Scab! Out of this shop! You work in a union shop, but you go out and buy a coat without a label!"

The operator tried to explain that he not bought the coat; he had made it himself out of his own cloth. He could bring witnesses who saw him making the coat. But the business-agent refused to listen. The man was fired, and the next day the Bible House sent up another operator to take his place.

One of the organizers used to come into a label shop on Houston Street, especially during slack time, to play cards. One day, he was so carried away by the game that he lost every cent he had on him and a few more besides But, like every gambler, he had to try to recoup his losses, so he borrowed money from the boss and stayed in the game. The next day, he came in to pay his debt. However, he brought not money, but a pack of labels. This infuriated the boss, who screamed: "How do you like this kind of business! When it comes to orders, he sees that Zussman gets all the work, but me he pays in union labels!"

The sweatshop methods of the union's leaders grew more intolerable and the resentment of the workers mounted. In 1911, locals 2 and 56 called a conference in Philadelphia of all the progressive locals in the country to consider the situation. At that conference, a Council was set up to work out a plan for the organization of the tailors in the men's garment trade. Max Pine became one of the organizers of the "rebels" and he, Ike Goldstein and David Oshinsky began preparations for the first big New York tailors' strike.

The strike took place in 1913 and aroused the interest of the population of the city. After 9 weeks of striking, the Rickerts and the Largers went off and made a settle-

ment with the employers for a 52-hour week. The other conditions to which they agreed were also to the disadvantage of the tailors. The Forward, which always followed the policy of supporting everything the union leadership did, not what the rank-and-file wanted, came out with a resounding Hurrah of victory and gave its blessing to the settlement.

The tailors, however, replied with a protest meeting on Rutgers Square. They refused to accept the agreement. And since repairs were being made at that time on the Square, and bricks were on hand, they expressed their feelings by breaking some of the windows of the Forward Building.

The strike continued and two weeks later another settlement was worked out. The work-week would be 50 hours, not 52, and certain increases in wages were also included. But the strike was the impetus to the building of a better union.

In 1914 the United Garment Workers' Union was due to hold a convention. The New York tailors demanded that the convention be held somewhere in the East, so that all the locals could send their full complement of delegates. The Bible House, however, which had made up its mind to run as far away from the "greenhorns" as possible, arranged the convention in Nashville, Tennessee.

Despite this maneuver, the New York locals strained every effort to send their delegates. And, at the convention, a struggle took place which resulted in the organization of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers' Union of America.

CHAPTER 29

The "Lost Generation"

AFTER THE STRIKE of 1913, most of the shops were unionized, but in many of them the changed situation gave rise to a sort of "lost generation." Many of the workers, as well as the bosses, could not make peace with the idea that the union had really come and had come to stay. There were workers, for instance, who could simply not comprehend the idea that the union, which was supposed to improve conditions, came and told them, instead, not to work overtime, or on Saturday or Sunday. The employers, on the other hand, small ones as well as large ones, knew from previous experience that unions are organized, make a noise for a couple of months and then fall apart. Some of them, of course, did not want to recognize the union even for that short period. Many of the "cockroach-bosses," the small contracting shops, waged a bitter life-and-death struggle against recognition of the union.

At that time, we had an abundance of idealists in the union, but pitifully few practical men. In addition, a number of petty grafters and job-hunters wormed their way into the organization to use it for their own ends. In some of the shops, chairmen were elected who actually belonged, body and soul to the employer, and worked with him against the interests of the workers.

In this situation, curious incidents took place which I think are worth recording here.

Bass & Gordon owned a shop on Goerick Street. One

of their operators, Benny Rosenthal, was in fact a "silent partner" in the business, and they worked things out so that Benny became the shop chairman. Naturally, Benny did everything he could for the partners and very little for the workers.

There were a couple of men in the shop who refused to join the union. For several weeks, Benny managed to keep this fact secret. He simply did not ask these men for dues and they didn't volunteer to pay them. Accidentally, one of the union men in the shop got onto these shenanigans and advised the union. When, a few days later, the business agent, Goldberg, came up to the shop and requested a meeting of the workers, Mr. Bass took matters into his own hands and started to push him out the door. Goldberg managed to signal the operators to stop working and come down to the union office for a meeting. Benny, the "shop chairman," tried to stall but sensing the mood of the men, he eventually shut off the power and accompanied them to the meeting.

At the meeting, Benny was exposed and removed from his post. A strike was called to compel the dismissal of the two non-union men, as well as the payment of a $50 fine by Mr. Bass for attempting to assault a union organizer. When the strike was a week old, the business-agent informed the men that each striker would receive strike benefits of five dollars a week. The next morning, the men appeared at the union hall and formed a line to collect their benefits.

As the men moved toward the cashier's desk, the new shop chairman suddenly noticed that among those in line were the two operators who had refused to join the union and who were the cause of the strike in the first place!

"What the devil are *you* doing here?" he demanded. "If you've decided to join up, you better go and see the membership committee!"

"No," they replied, "we're only waiting for our strike benefits. We're not working either, you know. What do you want us to do, starve to death?

* * *

Then there was Mr. Blank who swore by his wife and children that he would rather close down his shop than sign a contract with the union. "All right, you want security, I can understand that. But to force me to sign my name to a contract? Not on your life!"

After striking for two days, it occurred to somebody that maybe Mr. Blank refused to sign because he simply didn't know how!

The matter was diplomatically handled and Mr. Blank signed the contract, making the usual mark.

* * *

At one settlement meeting, a Mr. Goldman was warned that he would be severely fined if he insulted his employees or used foul language in talking to them. This was too much. He threw the pen savagely to the table and cried: "Shorter hours I understand. More money I understand. But not to be allowed to holler, to throw somebody out of my own shop by the seat of the pants —the hell with you and your unions!"

When, the next day, Goldman came to the union office to "settle" again, he first had to pay a fine for cursing the union. He was beside himself.

"This is the first time in my life—"

"But not the last—" someone interrupted him.

"What!" muttered Goldman through his clenched

teeth, "you'll never live to see it—that I should curse the union again and have to pay you for the privilege!"

* * *

At Greenberg's, on Broome Street, the following little "detective-story" took place:

On Saturdays, a few of the workers used to sneak into the shop and work without the permission of the union. The union got wind of it and sent a committee of two to catch them red-handed. They knocked on the locked door of the shop and when they were admitted found Mr. Greenberg, the foreman, and a few strangers, playing cards. Since no one was working and everything was "kosher," the two men fished some change out of their pockets and asked if they could take a hand.

The boss and the foreman exchanged looks and the foreman went off for a moment to another room. When he came back, he announced that he had to leave and wanted to lock up. "If you want to finish the game, go downstairs to the saloon."

Mr. Greenberg picked up the cards and moved everybody downstairs. They ordered beer and went on with the game. After about 15 minutes, the bartender came running over to Mr. Greenberg with the news that the police had just caught three burglars ransacking his shop. They all ran upstairs and found two policemen twisting the collars of the three operators who worked in the shop.

Between the frightened Mr. Greenberg and the crestfallen operators, the story came out. When the committee had knocked on the door, the three operators had hidden in the toilet. The foreman had then instructed them to wait a few minutes and then leave quietly by the front door. In their excitement they had misunder-

stood him, and when they heard the door close, tried to get out through a window to the fire-escape and down to the street. The two policemen just happened to be passing. . . .

Even more interesting was their defense at the hearing of the Grievance Board. "The committee has no proof that we were working. They didn't actually see us. But we saw *them*. And what were they doing? Drinking beer and playing cards with the boss; they admit it themselves. They're the ones who should be on trial, not we!"

CHAPTER 30

How Hillman and Schlossberg Became the First Officials of the Amalgamated

AFTER THE GREAT NEW YORK tailors-strike of 1913, and after the Nashville convention of the United Garment Workers' Union, the present Amalgamated Clothing Workers' Union was founded at a special convention in Webster Hall, New York.

The convention had before it the serious problem of electing the right men to head the new union. The first idea was that Joseph Schlossberg should be the Secretary-Treasurer. He was already very prominent on the Jewish scene. Known as the Jewish Daniel de Leon, he at that time edited the Yiddish Socialist Labor Party newspaper *Der Arbeter*. Schlossberg was particularly respected by the workers, especially the tailors, for his battle against the *Jewish Daily Forward,* which he attacked violently for its trashy content and for its watered-down Socialism.

Many workers, as well as people in other circles, then regarded Schlossberg as a paragon of honesty and integrity among workingclass leaders. For the same reason he was nicknamed "The Mezuza." In later years, the Mezuza became somewhat tarnished but at the time he was made secretary of the Amalgamated, even Socialists of the *Forward* school looked up to him with great respect.

My own introduction to Schlossberg took place in the following manner. One day an active worker — B. Reinish —invited me to "come and meet Joseph Schlossberg" in

a printing establishment on the East Side, where Schlossberg used to put together his newspaper.

When I entered the printing shop with Reinish, I beheld a man with the sensitive face of an artist and a head of stiff black hair. His manner was dry and reserved — somewhat like a cold bronze statue.

He knew Reinish from the Socialist Labor Party, but about me he asked him quietly: "And who is this young man?" Reinish introduced me as an active worker in the union and his best friend. There was only one trouble with me, he said. Instead of joining the S.L.P. I had become a member of the Socialist Party.

Schlossberg at once began to pump me about conditions in the shops; what was the difference between conditions in the union shops and the sweatshops; did I believe in industrial unionism. He began to talk earnestly to both of us: the struggle for the new union would be hard — not so much because of the old United Garment Workers' Union, but because of something else. The main fight, he prophesied, would be against the *Forward,* the *Geverkshaftn* (United Hebrew Trades), and Schlesinger — who would certainly help the President of the A.F. of L., Samuel Gompers, support the United Garment Workers Union against a new union.

Some months later Schlossberg had both to defend the Amalgamated and debate with Gompers at a meeting of the *Geverkshaften.* On that occasion Schlossberg, replying to a comment of Gompers, cried out bitterly: "If I were to die today I would leave my children nothing but my good name, and it would go hard with anyone who would dare to blacken it!"

But later he himself grew careless about his good name.

Hillman's First Opposition

When it was decided, before the establishment of the Amalgamated, that Schlossberg would become the general-secretary of the new union, there still remained the question: Who would be the right president?

To this question a *Forward*-man came with a proposal: Sidney Hillman.

Hillman had at that time been brought from Chicago to fill the position of Chief Clerk in the New York I.L.G.W.U. Union, which had formerly been held by Prof. Isaac A. Hourwich. Hillman had been recommended for this post by a number of prominent people in Chicago, where he had achieved a reputation as a capable union leader.

In the Cloakmakers' Union in New York he was soon beleaguered by a hostile clique who taunted him and began to heckle the life out of him. Many of the "comrades" of the *Forward* and the *Geverkshaften* were a party to this. Their motives were various, and none of them very pretty. They jeered at Hillman in ugly cartoons, one of which showed Hillman trying feebly and unsuccessfully to fill the shoes and wear the mantle of his predecessor Hourwitch. Another cartoon portrayed him as an insect crawling in the fur of Hourwitch's overcoat. They even ridiculed his Lithuanian-Yiddish accent.

Naturally, Hillman didn't like this treatment. He was hurt, resentful.

The *Forward*-man who originally proposed that Hillman take the post of president of the Amalgamated probably did so out of cynical motives. Primarily it would remove Hillman from the Cloakmakers' Union. But his proposal was taken very seriously. And when a

committee approached Hillman with the proposition of becoming head of the new tailors' union, he accepted without a moment's hesitation.

Sidney Hillman had a rich imagination and he soon formulated a plan of work. Everyone listened attentively as he presented it. But when he finished speaking and left the room, one of the cynics exclaimed mockingly: "It's we, and not the Cloakmakers, who will have to buy the railroad ticket to ship him back to Chicago!"

The *Forward* began to pull wires, first to scuttle the whole idea of organizing the new union; secondly, if that didn't work, to make sure that Sidney Hillman, the "boy from Chicago," had nothing to do with it.

But to Hillman's assistance came his fellow-Chicagoans, especially the Cutter's Local, which insisted that he become president

In the *Forward* circles they even tried to spread a rumor that Hillman would be a threat to the New York tailors because as president he would see to it that all the work went to Chicago.

But none of these schemes worked and in December, 1914, at the first convention of the new union, Sidney Hillman and Joseph Schlossberg were officially elected to the two top posts – General-President and General Secretary-Treasurer.

CHAPTER 31

Early Years of the Amalgamated

IMMEDIATELY upon his election, Hillman began energetically to carry out his duties as leader of the union. He knew that the people who ran the *Forward* were determined to discredit him. But Hillman had the stubbornness and perseverance of a fighter and he squared off to beat back any attempts to obstruct his leadership.

One of the methods he used was, as he himself expressed it, to pull the teeth of the *"Forward."* This meant to persuade some of its important functionaries to come to work for the Amalgamated. Abe Cahan and several of the other leaders of the *Forward* he tried to ignore completely. A second method he used was to do everything possible to win the trust and cooperation of the progressive rank-and-file members who were active in the union.

There was as yet no Communist Party, nor any progressive newspapers like the *Freiheit. However,* the Amalgamated did have among its members a fine group of progressive tailors who were deeply concerned about preventing the Amalgamated from becoming like the United Garment Workers' Union, from which they had just seceded.

* * *

In 1916, when the Amalgamated was preparing for its first constitutional convention, which took place in Baltimore, the progressive tailors in the New York Local 156 proposed a number of resolutions. It was my func-

tion as a delegate to get them before the convention for discussion.

One of them was: When an officer of the union leaves his post to become an employer, the union shall not recognize him and not negotiate an agreement with him for a period of two years. And when a boss becomes a worker again and joins the union, he shall not be permitted to become a union official until he has worked at least two years in a shop and it is ascertained that his record is good.

Concerning union officers' salaries, the proposal was that they be only a little higher than the wages of a skilled tailor. The same proposal said that when the union officials had to agree to a cut in wages for the shopworkers, this should also mean a cut in their own salaries.

Whether these resolutions were well-advised is a matter that belongs to history. But before the convention, Sidney Hillman held a conference with us, the progressive members, where he told us that he agreed completely with the above resolutions. Large salaries for union officials, he said, have a corrupting and demoralizing effect. Instead of remaining idealists and fighters for the working people, they in time will take over the function of lawyers or similar negotiators who are hired for large sums of money to perform a definite piece of work. The idealism is eventually submerged.

Among the leaders of the Amalgamated at that time were a number of men who, together with the progressive group, dreamed of making the Amalgamated a good union, a big, progressive organization which would be a model for the American labor movement. Here I would like to honor the memory of leaders such as Max Pine, who served the workers devotedly; Ike Goldstein, a national

organizer; David Oshinsky, the first manager of the New York Joint Board. A lot of trust and confidence was placed in Joseph Schlossberg, J. Gold and others.

But there were also a number of men who brought over to the Amalgamated all the old "baggage" of the Garment Workers, "Bible-House," as the older union was then called. The tailors gave the leaders of this sort a nickname: *Pupeklech-fressers* (chicken-gissard gluttons), because they used to sit all day in restaurants, eating, drinking and having a good time. They were no great credit to the union.

These people, from the outset, took it upon themselves to wage a fight against the progressive leaders. And in the *Forward* building, where the Amalgamated Joint Board used to hold its meetings every Saturday, there was many a pitched battle between the *Pupeklech-fressers* and the progressives.

I believe it would be of interest here to quote the Declaration of Principles, written by Joseph Schlossberg, as it appears in my old union book of 1916 in Yiddish; the entire union book was printed in that language for the Jewish workers.

Declaration of Principles of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union:

"The economic organization of the workers was shaped by the capitalist system of production, under which the separation between the ruling class and the oppressed class is based upon the ownership of the means of production. The class which owns these means is the class which rules. The class which owns nothing but its own labor power—to be found at all times for sale on the market—is the one which is oppressed.

"A continual, unceasing struggle goes on between these

two classes. In this struggle the economic organization of the workers — the union — is a natural weapon for attack and defense in the hands of the working class. But in order to be a useful weapon, and to serve its purpose effectively, the union must in its own structure adapt itself to the present organization of industry.

"Modern industrial methods soon abolish all craft-divisions, and thereby create the conditions which compel the workers to organize themselves on an industrial basis.

"The history of the class-struggle in this country during the past twenty years proves unmistakably the uselessness of the form, the methods and the spirit of craft unionism. It shows clearly too how dearly the working class has paid for the fact that in its own organization it has lagged far behind the development of industry. The working class must accept the principle of industrial unionism; otherwise it will remain forever powerless.

"The same forces which drive the working class toward industrial unionism also drive it to inter-industry unity, i.e., to closer association among the various industrial unions.

"This inevitable process will eventually lead to the general organization of the working class which will be united economically and politically on all levels of the class struggle, instead of, as now, being split and divided by outmoded theories and methods.

"The education of the working class is an absolutely necessary prerequisite to this great aim. It must therefore be an extremely important phase of the labor movement's mission.

"Every oppressed class in history has achieved its liberation only when it has acquired economic superiority.

The same law holds true in the struggle between capital and labor.

"The industrial and inter-industrial organization which is built upon the solid base of education in class-consciousness, will give the organized working class control over production, and the working class will then be ready to emerge as the real master thereof."

CHAPTER 32

A Sweat Shop With Improvements

AMONG the workers and the employers of the small sweatshops which the Amalgamated organized in the first years of its existence, you could often hear it said: "Some trick! Organizing the little shops on Broome Street and Cannon Street! Let the union organize Broadway—that'll be the *real* trick!"

By "Broadway" they meant the big and famous clothing firm of Cohen & Lang, which was located in a ten-story building at Broadway and Sixth Street. This firm was famous not only for its size, but for its high-handed methods in dealing with its competitors, as well as its employees. The two owners, Cohen, a Jew, and Lang, a German, were very seldom seen in the factory. Most of their workers did not even know them. But they did know, and know well, the manager of the plant, a German by the name of Graeber.

This Mr. Graeber, a former detective, ran a strike-breaking agency. The methods he instituted in the shop were enough to make you shudder, even for those days.

The coat department, which was on the tenth floor, was a block long and had an annex besides. The annex was fitted out with beautiful furniture and locked doors.

When the religious Jews in the shop wanted to call together a *minyan* to pray in memory of the dead, they would get permission to use the annex.

Mr. Graeber, however, used the annex for another pur-



A Modern Sweatshop

pose. This was the place where buyers were "entertained," often by young, pretty girls who worked in the shop. When the buyer came in to look over the line, Mr. Graeber would take him on a tour of the shop. When the buyer had made a selection among the girls, Mr. Graeber would brazenly, in the hearing of all the workers, put two fingers in his mouth and whistle to the girl who had been selected. "Somebody wants to see you in the annex!"

When the girl would return to the shop, she was often greeted by the cynical laughter and cheap jokes of many of the workers. Just as many, of course, hung their heads in shame.

Well, the Amalgamated decided to organize Cohen & Lang. But how to proceed? That was the problem facing the union leadership.

The first strategem was to get a number of union men into the shop. The present writer was picked as one of that group. Joseph Krigman, a walking delegate of that district, found someone to introduce me to Sam Diener, a sub-contractor at Cohen & Lang.

I met this Sam Diener one Saturday afternoon in a Roumanian restaurant on the East Side. We promised him that if he got me into the shop, and if a strike were ever called, I would help him obtain scabs. We ate a good steak and drank it down with a bottle of good wine and right there in my presence, Sam Diener called up Mr. Graeber and informed him that he had a man here who would be a big help in the event of a strike. Graeber didn't hesitate a moment. "Bring him right up!"

The shop was then working seven days a week, so the next morning I reported for work. Graeber received me very cordially and the other workers, noticing this understood that I must have some kind of "pull."

Several of the men, however, recognized me as a union leader. And since there were still a few workers around who weren't exactly in love with the union, they lost no time in identifying me to the manager. But Sam Diener assured Graeber that these were the very people who brought leaflets into the shop and who would start a strike!

With the help of this sub-contractor and scab-agent Sam Diener, we brought a good number of active union men into the shop and placed them in every department. When the strike-talk began to get stronger among the tailors in the trade, Mr. Graeber heard of it, of course, but he was certain that his shop would not be affected. Every day he invited one of us to go out and 'have a good time with him" and we always had to have a ready excuse to beg off.

On the eve of the strike, Sam Diener finally discovered that we were leading him up the creek. He caught one of us with a pack of leaflets and had it in his coat pocket ready to show to Mr. Graeber and expose us. Somehow, Graeber looked in Diener's pocket before he had a chance to tell him about the leaflets. Graeber refused to listen to Diener's explanation. Especially since we had already been spreading rumors throughout the shop that Sam Diener had joined the union! So Graeber unceremoniously had Diener thrown out of the shop.

The day of the big strike, the one question in everybody's mind was: Will the workers at Cohen & Lang come out? Graeber had arrived early that morning. Every few minutes he would call another one of us into his office to plan what to do in case this or that happened. We became a little apprehensive. What would Graeber do? Would

he call the police? Would he use the revolver he was always boasting about?

At one minute to ten we took our assigned positions. Each of us had a whistle in his pocket. At a signal we were to sound the whistles in every department at the same moment. All of us were to start the walkout together at precisely ten o'clock.

The piercing shrill of the whistles echoed through the shop. We stood up and started to move. In one corner of the room, a few of the pressers seemed to be vacillating. A couple of us went over to see what the trouble was. As we stood talking feverishly to them, Graeber picked up a big screw driver and tried to get at us, but the men quickly formed an iron ring around us. Graeber stood helpless and fuming as we marched out of the shop in a body.

CHAPTER 33

Peculiar Scabs

THE STRIKE AT COHEN & LANG came as a big surprise in the garment trade—both to the workers and the employers. Mr. Graeber, the manager of the firm, felt he had been humiliated. There was only one way he could stage a comeback: as a former detective, he began to use his talents in finding scabs.

Through our connections inside the shop, we discovered that Cohen & Lang's work was being sent out of New York. We immediately put ourselves in touch with a couple of expressmen who were transporting the packing cases and obtained the address of their destination. A few days later the work was being returned because of strikes at the out-of-town shops. We followed behind the returning cases of garments like a funeral procession.

Graeber then resorted to sending the goods to the railroad station in unlabelled cases. Then he would get someone inside the station to address them. So we organized a committee and went to see the station-master. We explained the situation to him and showed him how Cohen & Lang was using the railroad to break our strike. He listened sympathetically and promised to help us.

The next morning he gave us the addresses of the New Jersey shops to which the cases were being shipped, but refused to take the box of cigars we had brought him as a gift. He was glad to be able to help us, he said, and that was reward enough for him.

A few days later, the cases came back again, and again we staged a "funeral" for them.

But one day we heard a piece of news which struck us like a bolt of lightning. At one of our shop meetings, a responsible worker reported he had irrefutable proof that scabs were working at Cohen & Lang's at night. The news dumbfounded us. We tried to assure the men that we would look into the matter immediately and that if necessary we would organize all-night picket-lines at the shop.

But first we had to try to discover who was actually working. We asked the elevator-man in the building across the street to take our committee of three up to the roof and let us remain there all night. From this vantage point we could see straight into the windows of the tenth floor of Cohen & Lang. He agreed to do so, but warned us to be extremely careful of the electric wires on the roof.

Up on the roof the minutes began to drag like years. The clock finally moved to eight, to nine, and the air turned cooler. The pitch-blackness threw a cloak of gloominess upon us. And the windows across the street were still dark.

But soon, the quiet and the darkness were both shattered. The lights blazed on in Cohen & Lang's. We could see Mr. Graeber striding majestically about the shop. Mary, the bookkeeper, a lithe, Italian beauty, flitted gracefully through the shop. Mr. Graeber carried a large roll of goods to the cutting table and unrolled it across the table. Our teeth began to chatter, and not entirely from the cold. We held a quick council of war and decided that the report of scabbing must be true. Cohen &

Lang were operating during the night and we had better watch closely.

So we watched and it was not our fault that we had to play the role of Peeping Tom. As Mr. Graeber paced about the shop, he collided with Mary and she seemed to float into his arms. After a moment he lifted her up and carried her to the cutting table, just as he had done to the roll of cloth, which was now spread out neatly, like a blanket. . . .

We could not help laughing. This was a new kind of scabbing!

In a little while, they both put on their coats, turned out the lights and left the shop. We stayed at our observation point on the roof, feeling somewhat ashamed of ourselves, but overjoyed and relieved. Such damned outlandish scabs!

So we spent the night on the cold roof, waiting for dawn and the elevator man.

The news of the "night-scabbing" spread quickly after we told our story to the tailors on the picket lines. And of course we made sure that Mr. Cohen of Cohen & Lang, heard the story, too. A day or so after the occurrence, he invited a committee of strikers and union leaders to meet with him. After a few conferences, the announcement came that Cohen & Lang would be a union shop and that all the demands of the union had been won.

CHAPTER 34

The End of a Scab Agent

WHEN THE AMALGAMATED broke the anti-union fortress of Cohen & Lang and we returned to work, everything in the shop seemed extremely new and strange. Many of the workers looked questioningly at each other and thought: how would the bull-headed, union-hating Graeber act now? What kind of revenge did he have planned? Curious glances went from one to the other, from the tables to the office, from the office to the elevator. Where was Mr. Graeber and what would he do when he walked into the shop?

But Mr. Graeber came out of the elevator as though nothing at all had happened. He stood still for a moment, looked around and started for the office. The shop-chairman, who had been elected at a meeting of the workers, looked at the clock. It was exactly eight. He took his whistle out of his pocket and blew it— the first note for union hours and decent conditions.

But this obviously incensed Mr. Graeber. He began to scream at the top of his voice: "Goddamit! Get out of my shop!" His tall, thin body suddenly collapsed and he fell to the floor as though he had suffered a heart attack. In a few minutes, an ambulance arrived. The doctor diagnosed his condition as a paralytic stroke brought on by extreme anger. He was taken to the hospital.

Herman Goldstein, the foreman of one of the other departments, was appointed manager. For six months he

managed the shop, taking care to abide by all the union conditions. The workers were satisfied and everything was quiet and peaceful.

One morning, Goldstein informed us that Graeber was feeling better and that he was coming back as manager. Naturally, we didn't like the prospect, but there was nothing we could do about it. At ten o'clock the following morning. Mr. Graeber appeared in the shop and went straight to the office. He seemed a broken shell, and supported himself on a cane. Someone whispered: "This is one dog who deserves his stick!"

In a little while, Graeber came out of the office and began his tour of the shop, walking slowly and leaning heavily on his cane. He went from department to department until he came to the table where the operators sat. Here he paused for a while, shaking on his cane, and then suddenly began where he had left off six months before: "'Get out of my shop!"

And again the same thing happened. He turned blue, twisted up like a burnt-out match and collapsed. Again he was taken to the hospital. Again Herman Goldstein became manager. And Cohen & Lang, Inc., stopped dreaming about Graeber and his open shop.

In fact, Cohen & Lang became a model union-shop, and a desirable place to work.

* * *

The story of Mr. Graeber has an interesting sequel. Several years later, I was passing by Broadway and Spring Street when I heard someone calling me. I turned and saw a familiar figure leaning on a cane in the doorway of a cafeteria. For a moment, I was at a loss: should I recognize him or not? But I decided to speak to him. I knew that this dog had lost his teeth.

Mr. Graeber greeted me warmly, like an old friend, and invited me in for a cup of coffee. "This is my place," he informed me, "and here I make my living now—and an honest living it is too." He asked the bus-boy to bring two cups of coffee and I saw he was anxious to get something off his chest. He began by complimenting the Amalgamated and patted me on the shoulder as he did so. "You gave me a good fight! And you boys taught me a lesson too. What a sucker I was! I did everything I could for Cohen & Lang. I brought them business. I saved them money. I kept their place an open shop, as they wanted me to do. They were dead set on it. That's why I was so stubborn about keeping the union out. But what happened in the end? Mr. Cohen himself signed the agreement with the union and left me holding the bag like a damn fool! And that's not all. All the time I was sick in the hospital, they never even came once to visit me. Not once. At first, Mary used to bring me my pay. Then they forgot about that, too. Later when I opened this cafeteria, I invited them to the opening. They didn't come. They didn't send me a bouquet, or a broom, or even a post-card. . . . That's bosses for you!" He seemed genuinely hurt, like a naive, innocent child.

When I said good-bye to him, he repeated several times: "It doesn't pay to be a skunk . . . it doesn't pay. . . ."

CHAPTER 35

Long Live the Brooklyn Bridge!

EVEN AFTER THE TAILOR'S UNION had begun to make some inroads, the situation was still bad and the sweatshop problems were far from solved. The men themselves did not put too much trust in the "Bible House," as the United Garment Workers' Union was then cynically called and where it was then located. A short time later the workers rebelled and organized the Amalgamated Clothing Workers' Union.

One of the complicating factors was the fierce competition between the contracting shops of New York and Brooklyn. The New York tailors were incensed against the Brooklyn tailors—and vice versa.

On Pitt Street, there was a little shop that belonged to a man called "Moishe Pupek." He was awarded this name because he loved to munch on chicken-gizzards (*pupeks*) when he drank a *"l'chayim"*—and that was quite frequently. In addition to this habit, he had the much more baneful one of "being free with his fists."

It happened that one day, when he had been a little too "free," that his victim, an operator in his shop, let him have it right back and knocked out a couple of Moishe's teeth. The operator put on his coat and walked out and we naturally assumed that he had quit before Moishe could fire him. But a few minutes later he returned with a bottle of wine and a bag of *"pupkelech"* and soon he and Moishe were friends again.

But this pugnacious Moishe Pupek was mortally afraid of unions. "That's all I need—a union in my shop! Not even allowed to slap a man's ears down when he deserves it!"

So one quiet summer evening, Moishe packed up his few machines and moved his shop to Siegal Street in Brooklyn. There he acquired a partner named Tishler and several more machines. Moishe selected a number of workers from his New York shop and Tishler selected some from his Brooklyn shop and the rest were fired. But the new partners had reckoned without the local antagonisms of the time. The New York tailors refused to work with the tailors from Brooklyn. They argued that it was really a New York shop and that the jobs belonged to the men from the Pitt Street place. But the Brooklyn operators argued "nothing doing"; it was still their shop on Siegel Street, they had worked for Tishler for years and they would be damned if they would let any New Yorkers so much as set a foot inside the building.

The bosses, Moishe Pupek and Mr. Tishler, in the meantime began secret negotiations with the Brooklyn workers to lower their rates; the conditions were that with lower rates the shop would be able to get more orders and only the Brooklyn workers would be hired.

At the same time, a group of men from the New York shop were negotiating with the examiner of the "main" manufacturer to open a corporation shop in New York and do the work even more cheaply than Brooklyn. They put together a few hundred dollars and opened their own shop. Nate Godick pawned his wife's wedding ring. Harry Leff sold his watch and chain. Others borrowed from friends and family. And they opened a shop on Pike Street.

For a few exciting weeks, there was a bitter battle between New York and Brooklyn. The manufacturer maneuvered things so, through his people in both shops, that both contractors received a ration of orders and both of them kept cutting the price.

One Saturday afternoon at the Pig Market, a Brooklyn operator from Moishe Pupek's shop met an operator from the New York shop and they got to talking and comparing notes. They decided that this competition was not only driving the guts out of them but cutting their throats at the same time. The only solution, they concluded, was to have a committee of both shops get together and work out one price and divide the work equally between the two.

The workers in both shops, when they heard the proposal, accepted it. But there was one hitch: Where should the negotiating committee meet? The Brooklyn men wanted the New Yorkers to meet them in a saloon on Myrtle Avenue. The New Yorkers insisted on a wine-cellar on Rivington Street.

The point was bandied about for two weeks, until someone had the bright idea of meeting in a "neutral" spot, which would avoid offending anyone's honor. One bright idea followed another, and the neutral zone that suggested itself naturally was the middle of the Brooklyn Bridge. What better way of meeting each other half-way? So it was decided that on Saturday afternoon at two o'clock precisely, each committee would start its walk across the bridge and at whatever point they met they would hold the "peace conference."

The plan was carried out and the two groups met almost at the middle of the bridge. They shook hands and eyed each other up and down as if to gauge the op-

position's sincerity. One inequity almost wrecked the conference even before it got started. The New York committee consisted of three men, while Brooklyn had come with four. In the spirit of cooperation, however, one of the four voluntarily withdrew and went to visit relatives in Manhattan and the meeting got under way.

One of the Brooklyn delegates, a man named Levy, had already learned something about Socialism, so he took this opportunity to use his knowledge and oratorical ability. He made a speech at the top of his voice and attracted a little audience from among the passersby. "Brothers," he declaimed with passion, "we must stand united! Not only all over the world, but also in Brooklyn, Brownsville and New York!"

After the speeches, it was decided to demand of the manufacturer that he sign a union agreement with both shops; the harmony should be established between the shops; that working hours must be regulated and wages increased. If the company refused to accept such an agreement, then both sides would go out on strike simultaneously.

That both committees were in earnest about the resolve was proven immediately after the meeting adjourned. When the New York committee proposed that they all go to a certain Roumanian restaurant on Rivington Street to "make a *l'chayim,*" the proposal was accepted unanimously without any debate whatsoever. And at the table in the restaurant, the pact was sealed with a toast:

"Long live the bridge of unity between New York and Brooklyn!"

CHAPTER 36

"Amalgamation"

WORSE EVEN THAN the gangsters and the attacks of the employers was the division among the workers, and the competition between some of the local unions in New York, Brooklyn and Brownsville.

The Joint Board of the Amalgamated was supposed to be a central body, but every local was a "kingdom" for itself, and there were a lot of locals. The competition was so unbridled that it resulted in real "contests"—if one local set a mild punishment for an infraction of a certain union rule, its competitor would make the fine more severe for the very same infraction. If one local set a high initiation fee, its competitor would set a higher one. It was not unusual for an operator to complain to a grievance board: "What's the idea! For working on Saturday in New York you fine me 15 dollars. In Brownsville I did much worse things but I never had to pay the union more than five!"

The competition extended to the business agents; each one wanted to get more work for his local and his area. Naturally, this led to rate-cutting.

Some of the results would have been comical, as the saying goes, if they hadn't been so tragic. In one shop which had moved from New York to Brooklyn, a coat was returned from the warehouse to have a sleeve reset. The operator refused to touch it. "I'm not going to waste my time fixing the work of a New York bungler!" It took

a conference between the shop chairman, the boss and the operator to fix the sleeve.

Then there was the finisher who was crowned with the name of Missus Shloymeh. Shloymeh was a member of Brownsville Local 214. Things got slack in his shop on Sutter Avenue, so he went to New York to look for work. Shloymeh knew very well, however, that the people in the Labor Bureau would not take very kindly to this interloper from Brownsville. So he went and borrowed a union book from his sister-in-law who worked as a finisher in a New York shop. Apparently it never occurred to him that the name of the member was on every book. The clerk in the Labor Bureau, who knew Shloymeh very well, took one look at the union book and shrieked: "Missus Shloymeh, what are you doing with somebody else's book?" The union members who were in the hall at the time picked up the "Missus Shloymeh" story and it soon spread through the market. Shloymeh, of course, had to surrender the book, but there was nothing the union could do to him for this infraction. Charges could not be brought against him in the New York local because he was not a member there, and in Brownsville they would laugh the New York charges out of court. The result was that Shloymeh's sister-in-law was the one who was fined for lending her union book to a competitor. The only punishment Shloymeh got was the nickname—which stuck to him for the rest of his life.

* * *

These troubles and difficulties caused by the competing unions drove the progressive elements to push for the amalgamation of all the locals. A plan was worked out to create one union, with one Grievance Board and one membership committee. Operators' Local 156 initiated the negotiations with the other locals to getting the plan

started.

In some of the locals, however, there were politicians and patriots who fought hard against new ideas. They would fight to the death against "amalgamation," they cried. A presser by the name of Kolushkin took the floor at one meeting to show the membership how bad things would be if the plan were carried through. "Do you realize, brothers," he orated bombastically, "what amalgamation means? Amalgamation, brothers, is like drinking beer and whisky in one glass. Your head starts spinning and soon you've got to spew it all out again or you'll die. Remember, brothers, beer is beer, and whisky is whisky, and don't ever mix them!"

The majority of the membership, however, supported the work of the progressives in the Amalgamated and the amalgamation was carried out. Local 156 of New York was the first to unite with Local 259 of Brooklyn and Local 215 of Brownsville. This local was joined by the the Canvas and Pad Makers Local 153 and the Palm Beach workers. Together they formed the new Local 5. At the same time, the tailors of the Brooklyn Local 213 and the Brownsville Local 214 amalgamated with New York Local 2. Later this amalgamation resulted in the present United Local 25 of operators and tailors.

When we finally convinced even the doubters and the opponents of "amalgamation" to go through with the unification, a celebration was arranged at which the agreement would be ratified. The place chosen was a Roumanian restaurant on Forsythe Street. There was plenty to eat and drink, and the skeptics paid much more attention to the refreshments than to the speeches. The talk flowed, and the whisky and beer, and suddenly Mr. Kreitzer stood up with a chicken-leg in one hand and a wing in the other and sang out: "Brothers! Long live the

amalgamation! You fellows had more sense than we did! *L'chayim!"*

When we finally signed the agreement of amalgamation and had folded it up neatly to turn over to the national office, one of our former opponents, who had apparently imbibed more than his capacity began to "return" some of the liquor.

Again Kolushkin was on his feet, albeit a little unsteadily this time. "Well brothers, what did I tell you? I told you this would be the result of your amalgamation! Now do you believe me?"

I Am Rewarded

Afterward, this writer was honored with a banquet arranged by the Local Union. *"Fortshrit"* (Progress), organ of the Amalgmaated, wrote that "this banquet was arranged to give recognition to Brother Sam Liptzin's energetic and devoted activity. Brother Liptzin, although not one of the oldest members of the organization, has been one of the most active participants in the life of the organization since its founding. He was also one of the few in the organization who worked with all his energy for the unification of the separate locals into one union; this effort was crowned with complete success. . . . His praiseworthy activity was recognized also by the presentation of a Loving Cup of Brother Sam Liptzin, as well as a presentation of a ten-volume world history in Yiddish, presented and personally autographed by President Hillman."

When I was later expelled from the union for exposing the graft and racketeering of the Beckerman gang, I had plenty of time for reading the History of the World presented to me by President Sidney Hillman, as well as for recording some history of that underworld itself.

CHAPTER 37

The *Pupeklech-Fresser* Eat Up the Union

THE UNITED GARMENT WORKER'S UNION was very quickly smashed in its fight against the Amalgamated. It lost every meaningful contact with the tailors. Hillman brought over all its important functionaries. Actually there were too many of these old officials coming over to the Amalgamated. They started playing a double role. They foresaw a cozy future for themselves as both leaders of the new union and good friends of the bosses.

Most of them were rotten, corrupt, utterly-cheap politicians — real *pupeklech-fressers*. Day and night, they lived in the saloons at 56 Orchard Street and 98 Forsythe. The progressive tailors immediately saw the danger facing the new union. But Hillman tried to reassure us. As soon as the union established itself, we would clean out the dirt. Joseph Schlossberg used to say confidently: We won't allow our union business to be conducted in saloons!

Sidney Hillman, who was always busy with "big-time politics," left the local affairs to the local politicians. Hillman, people used to say, was a smart business man. He bought up the brains of professors at a quarter a pound and sold their wisdom for a dollar. . .

Hillman made connections with "important people" — with such figures as Professor Ripley, Professor Frankfurter, Dr. Wollman, Fiorello La Guardia, J. B. Salutsky and other community and cultural leaders. This had a

considerable effect upon the workers, who were impressed when they saw that the "cream of society" supported the Amalgamated. But on the other hand, the Beckermans, the David Wolffs, the Harry Cohns, and other officials, began to "buy up" the underworld figures in the employer camp, figures who were quite influential with the bosses. Instead of fighting gangsterism and driving it out, they brought it a new market.

One day, after quiet discussion with Max Pine, (an honest straight-forward trade-unionist), who was cool to the *Forward,* Sidney Hillman called us in and explained that the "best way to be sure a dog won't bite is to pull out his teeth." Then he made his proposal: The Amalgamated would engage the "Forward-boys" as officials, lawyers, organizers and advisors, and then, instead of the union fighting Cahan and the *Forward,* the former *Forward* people would do it; it would be the Forward Association who would then defend the Amalgamated against *the Geverkshaftn* and against Benjamin Schlesinger (leader of the International Ladies Garment Workers) who was secretly knifing the Amalgamated.

In accordance with this plan, they engaged Jacob Pankin and Meyer London as attorneys. They made place for Max Goldfarb, Hillel Rogoff, Charles Irvine, J. B. Salutsky, A. Shiplakov, Adolph Held, and with them came a whole gang *Geverkshaftn* "boys" who proved to be a constant threat in the heart of the Amalgamated. That the *Forward* did not succeed in subverting the Amalgamated was due only to the fact that Hillman was an expert, cunning "buyer," both among the employers and among the corrupt group around the *Forward.* He understood whom and how to buy and how to handle what he bought.

The result of this, however, was that instead of rebuilding the tailors' union from the foundation to the roof, we had to be satisfied with a new coat of paint and a new sign: AMALGAMATED. But thanks to the trust and hope which the thousands of tailors maintained in the union, it was successful in accomplishing a great deal against the sweatshops and the home-work, and in achieving better scales of hours and wages.

This trust could not last very long, however, because the foundation of the union soon revealed itself to be defective. It was a group of misleaders who swallowed the Amalgamated and not the other way around. Politically, Hillman did have the upper hand, but the economic power was theirs.

Thus, for instance, one of the main slogans of the new union was: "Organize the unorganized!"; get ALL the tailors into the union; stop the competition between New York, Brooklyn, Brownsville and "out-of-town." In principle, strong resolutions were adopted; in actuality, these resolutions were well-calculated tricks of some of the officials to squeeze out more graft and entrench the corruption. The top leaders knew all about this, but instead of going to the membership with the problem, they tried to correct it by putting one patch on top of another.

Many "bigshots" in the locals too, in the name of "principles," and with fiery, demagogic phrases, proposed resolutions at the union meetings and conventions to keep new machinery out of the shops. Instead of placing the emphasis on abolishing the sweatshop, instituting shorter hours, using the new inventions for the benefit of the workers, they started a campaign to smash the new

pressing machines, basting machines, cutting machines, etc.

And this is how they put their principles into practice: When leaders such as David Wolff, Harry Cohn, Mendele Yudelevitch, Kleinman, Beckerman, and others—among them some Italian leaders — began a campaign to organize a firm or an out-of-town shop, it was done with an eye on how much they could make out of the "deal," regardless whether the money would come from the union treasury or the employer whom they were supposed to be organizing.

Their hangers-on in the locals had their own source of income. On the one hand they screamed: "Workers, come join the union!"; but on the other hand, when the worker came to join the union, he found a heavy door barring the way. They chased him from one local to another, from New York to Brooklyn, from Brooklyn to Brownsville, until finally he had to make his own "deals"outside the union, pay graft, "treat the boys," and then he *might* become a union man. There were also workers who waited for a strike situation somewhere so that they would have the opportunity to scab; then, as scabs, and for a minimum dues payment, they would be enrolled in the union.

Similarly, some of the local officials made money out of stopping the competition between New York and the out-of-town shops. They took graft from the manufacturer for allowing the union cutters to work and for sending the material to scab shops, and then they took graft from the contractor in the scab shops to whom the work was shipped. They used to bring into Passaic or some other town a truckload of cuttings, call together the contractors and hold an auction — whichever contractor

"bid" more graft got the work. Naturally, the contractor made up his money at the expense of the starving tailors, who wanted to "get even" with another shop which had underbid the lot the week before. The workers thus cut their own throats and some of the officials were able to take graft on all sides.

Such tricks were also performed in the locals where the bigshots of Pressers' Local 3 used to storm against the new pressing-machines. They decided that only the large "inside-shops" would be permitted to use the machines, but behind the scenes they organized a racket. One of the business agents in the union became the salesman for the pressing-machine company. When the small contractors wanted to get a machine, they now had to pay graft for every machine they were permitted to install and for getting rid of the extra pressers in the shop.

It worked this way: Let's say it was a shop with 12 pressers and the contractor wanted to install the new machines. The politicians of the Local would come and negotiate secretly with eight of the pressers, assuring them of a steady job and even a few dollars more pay, if they would agree to reduce the "set" (the number of pressers). If not, the boss had threatened to move out of town, and then the union wouldn't be able to do a thing.

The poor pressers understood this swindle only too well, but they couldn't help themselves because of the terror. So they would agree to the firing of their own union brothers. A few weeks later the union officials would come to the shop and reorganize the remaining eight pressers. This time they would make a deal with five of them against three, because the contractor would argue that he still had too many pressers and he wanted the five men who were left to have a full week's work.

So the five pressers would agree to getting rid of the other three.

The progressive workers certainly had a solution to the problem of the new machinery. We showed that there was only one way to prevent the unemployment which would result from the new invention: The union must state clearly that we were not against industrial progress; on the contrary, we must use the machines to make things easier for the workers. But wherever an employer installed a new machine, the number of working hours must be reduced. This would protect workers from being thrown into the open market to become the slaves of competition.

However, the politicians in the tailors, pressers and other union locals had only one thing in mind: to insure their own future even if it had to be at the expense of the helpless workers.

CHAPTER 38

Tracking Down The Scabs

IN 1920 THE MANUFACTURERS' ASSOCIATION of the men's clothing industry decided to try its luck in a battle against the growing and expanding Amalgamated Clothing Workers' Union. They set forth a program of seven demands against the union which, if effectuated, would have meant very simply a return to the sweatshop system. In order to carry out this program, they declared a lockout against the 60,000 organized tailors in New York. Their chief weapons were the injunction and gangsters. The union replied with a strike which turned out to be one of the bitterest in the history of the clothing industry.

One day, during the course of the strike, we discovered that the men who were picketing a shop on Broome Street during the day, were scabbing in that same shop at night! A committee was immediately chosen to go to the shop that night and investigate. But the door was locked and the committee could not get in. After a short council-of-war we hit on the following stratagem: We would visit the wife of one of the suspected scabs with the story that her husband was really using the job for a secret tryst and that that was why he was not coming home nights.

We planted the story and waited to see what she would do. She fell for it and that evening we followed her to the shop. She knocked on the door and when the watchman sleepily opened it, one of the committee pushed

past her and stuck his foot in the door. Then we all moved in behind him.

The committee had been under the impression that the secret-tryst story was a complete invention. But it didn't turn out quite that way. As soon as we entered the shop itself, we noticed a light go out in the office. Thinking to catch the scabs red-handed, we leaped over a partition and pushed open the door. To our amazement, a woman ran out of the office carrying her dress in her hand. Inside the office stood the husband, looking extremely uncomfortable.

The watchman, a new man on the job, defended himself with the excuse that up until 10 o'clock there *had* been a group of men working in the shop; then one of the men had told him he had to fit out his wife for a new suit and he would use the office for the purpose. . . . The real wife of the scab husband took care of him single-handedly; the committee stood by and observed without having to lift a finger. . . .

* * *

Another time we discovered that a group of workers, together with their contractor, was planning to open a scab shop in Woodbine, New Jersey. The boss had arranged to meet with them in a little synagogue in a hall on East Broadway. He had assured them that the manager and the designer of his company would also be there.

The strike committee reasoned that merely breaking up this meeting would be fruitless; it would be more profitable to let it go on and try to smoke out the plans. But how to do it? For this part of the operation we turned to a certain Mendl, who was known as a walking information bureau. Mendl was not an orator or an organizer,

but he had a genius for getting into places to which he was not invited. For this assignment he worked out the following scheme: Early in the evening he went into the synagogue with a sandwich in his pocket and quite unobtrusively worked his way into the corner where the Holy Ark stood. He then ducked behind the curtain of the Ark, making sure that a window nearby was open to provide him with fresh air. At seven o'clock, the meeting began to gather—the boss, the designer, the manager and the scabs. They discussed all their plans, settled the rates and even devised a system whereby they could collect strike benefits and still work the shop in Woodbine.

When this company of scabs had finished the meeting, turned out the lights and left the synagogue, Mendl crept out of his hiding place and made for the door. But it was locked from the outside. Mendl began to knock. He knocked so long that the superintendent of the hall came to investigate. In answer to the super's questions, Mendl explained rather sheepishly that he had fallen asleep at the services and the rest of the congregation had gone home without noticing him. Mendl was not sure his story fully convinced the superintendent, but at any rate, with the help of the Ark and its curtain, the plans for opening a scab shop in Woodbine, New Jersey, were thwarted completely.

CHAPTER 39

Oil-Cloth and Graft

THE UNION MEMBERS were continuously occupied with strikes and struggles against various scab-nests throughout the country. But many stains began to appear which were no credit or honor to the Amalgamated. Too much time of the Joint Board was wasted in cleaning up these stains which very often, unfortunately, were merely covered over, patched-up or "pressed-out."

The union bought a building in Brooklyn—Arion Hall—to house its offices. The members were pleased when the hall was remodeled and the Amalgamated moved in. But in the Finance Committee, a ruckus developed over the money which P. M. the secretary-treasurer of the Joint Board—had spent on the building. Especially mysterious was the sum spent on the "oil-cloth" to cover the floors of the building. One member of the Finance Committee argued that the bill would be no larger for covering the whole length of the Brooklyn Bridge. Another said that for that amount of money they could have covered all the floors in all the shops in New York, so that the workers would not have to stand on dirty floors all their lives.

The defenders of P. M. averred, however, that these disclosures and protests (which came from his own comrades) were "sour-grapes" and stemmed from disappointment in not getting pieces of the oil-cloth for their own homes. After all, there was simply not enough to go around for everybody. . . .

In this connection, there was an incident which illustrates the folk-saying that "In a house where someone has hung himself, it is better not to talk about rope."

An elderly tailor came to the union offices to ask for money to pay his rent. His explanation was that he had now been on strike for eight weeks and had been evicted from his dwelling. Yesterday, he had found a new flat but he needed the first month's rent.

The committee voted to give him the 25 dollars. One of the men went to the waiting room to bring him the good tidings. The tailor was overjoyed, but immediately came up with a second request. "Perhaps you could also give me a piece of oil-cloth?"

"Oil-cloth? Where the devil can we get you a piece of oil-cloth?"

"What do you mean—where?" asked the tailor cunningly. "Didn't I hear many times that you have oil-cloth for the whole Brooklyn Bridge? Couldn't you even spare a little piece for my kitchen?"

The committeeman tried to snatch the check back from the tailor's hand but the latter was too fast for him. . . .

* * *

About this time the union began to investigate charges of graft and corruption in various departments. One day, I received an invitation from an assistant manager of the Joint Board to come to his house for Sunday dinner. On Sunday, I found a few other active members of the Executive Board, together with their wives, at his home.

The hostess, apparently not too clever a woman, immediately began to show off various gifts which she had lately received. "See this," she said, holding up an expensive handbag, "this was just given me by So-and-So, the contractor. And Mr. Thus-and-so, the manufacturer,

is a wonderful man, isn't he? He paid for two weeks in the country for me, just so I could keep his wife company!"

As we listened to her, meaningful winks flew around the room. Poor woman, she obviously liked to talk, and she kept talking about herself and various officials of the union, quite undiplomatically, and with every word the smell of graft grew stronger. There is no telling where she would have stopped had not her husband, the assistant-manager Drubin, come into the room to put an end to her "conversation."

Naturally, the matter was brought to the attention of the Joint Board. But as soon as he got wind of the pending investigation, the assistant-manager turned in his resignation and opened up a business.

His wife, we discovered later, had worked out her own peculiar logic about the situation. "You call the Amalgamated a union? Such a union—it takes up for the bosses! If the bosses want to throw away their money on expensive presents, that's the union's business? I don't like such unions!"

CHAPTER 40

Racketeers of the World, Unite!

DURING THE PERIOD when things were booming in the clothing trade, the Amalgamated took the opportunity to establish itself firmly in the industry, both in New York and throughout the rest of the country. When the employers began to feel that the union had really come to stay, their tactics turned to discrediting the union and terrorizing the members. The union members, on the other hand, had begun to feel the strength of their organization, and they fought back. Daily there were strikes and stoppages, especially against the bosses in the smaller sweatshops, who had no conception of the "sanctity of contract" or mutual responsibility to an agreement.

The large firms, such as V. J. Freedman, Bashevitch, Big-Six, Cohen & Lang, V. F. Goldman, Kelson, Witty Brothers, Kulak's and others, began to look for ways of deceiving the union, mainly by getting their work done in bootleg shops. Their favorite place of refuge was Bush Terminal in Brooklyn, where it was impossible to approach the workers to talk to them. The major weapon of the employers was a chain of sweatshops which they organized out-of-town, "in the country," and which created a permanent source of competition to the union shops in New York City.

Unfortunately, an important role in this "scab business" was played by a number of union leaders, together with some former officers who had a hand in the Employ-

ers' Associations. A number of prominent gangsters became silent partners in the factories, selling protection against the union.

The wages in the out-of-town shops were next-to-nothing, and some of the union leaders instead of organizing the workers in these shops (who were mostly women and young people off the farms), adopted resolutions against women working machines, etc., creating the impression that they would thus eliminate the competition in the country. The best means to this end, they asserted loudly, was to lower rates in the city, establish piece-work systems, work longer hours, and other such nonsense. There were even instances of the union fining workers for demanding a raise in pay or for switching shops.

These leaders, of course, were nobody's fools. They were only trying to make fools of the union members. For their own pockets, there was a whole system of graft, tremendous sums which passed from the employers to certain union leaders. Ten cents for every vest, 15 cents for every pair of pants, 25 cents for every coat manufactured in the out-of-town shops, was the usual rate. The gangsters, on their part, sold their services to the employers at similar rates.

This graft, corruption and racketeering was so open that often families would divide up "spheres of influence" among their members. One brother would become a leader in the union, another brother would open a shop, another would become a graft collector. There was one case of a "trio" of brothers who worked out the following neat little scheme. One was a manager in the union, the second was a business agent, the third owned a scab-shop in Connecticut. When the union tried to organize the shop in Connecticut, an organizing committee from New

York was sent by the manager to do the job. Later it was discovered that the members of this committee had scabbed in the out-of-town shops all the time the union was paying them weekly wages to organize a strike.

When I began a struggle in the locals and at the Joint Board against the traitorous methods of the so-called leaders, and against the inroads of gangsterism in the union, I had the following narrow escape. About two o'clock one afternoon I was suddenly called off my job at Witty Bros. and summoned to come immediately to the office of the secretary-treasurer of the Joint Board. After a few minutes in his office, I got the feeling that the words, halting and disjointed, were making less and less sense and that he was simply stalling for time. At half-past five he abruptly put on his hat, said he had to go to a meeting and escorted me downstairs to the street car. Then he left me.

Something was fishy, but I had no inkling of what it might be until several days later when Pinny Pasikoff, who was then an organizer for the Amalgamated, told me the story. The "gang" had decided to wait for me that evening outside the shop and "send me to the hospital." The plan leaked out and Pasikoff got wind of it. He immediately went storming into the office with the charge that the plan would backfire; it would only stir up the members more and create a real scandal. He convinced them, but by that time it was too late to call off the dogs. So he got me out of the shop and into his office and kept me there until after the time set for the "rendezvous." And that was how I escaped a few broken ribs and maybe worse. . . .

An important role in the trade was then being played by the four Cooper Brothers. One was organizer and man-

ager of the Expressmen's Union of the Amalgamated; the other three had formed an express company which trucked work to and from the shops.

Came a point where the union and the destiny of all the tailors lay in the hands of the Cooper Brothers. They simply delivered the work only to the shops they themselves chose and whenever they chose. And what they wanted, of course, was to deliver more and more work to the out-of-town shops. The situation infuriated the tailors so much that they organized themselves into mass committees and overturned the trucks on the road to Passaic. The trucks then armed themselves with gangsters and machine-guns.

The union leaders, instead of adopting the simplest solution, which was to stop the cutters from preparing the work transported to the out-of-town scab shops, or at least to try to organize these shops, did something really ridiculous. That is, for the union-members it was ridiculous. For the "gang" it was quite rational.

The plan was to buy out Cooper Brothers. Pay the Cooper Bros. for their trucks and put them out of business. Maybe they would then go into another business, but at least they would not be in a position to dictate the delivery of the goods which the tailors depended on for a living. Thirteen thousand dollars was the price agreed upon. One day the union paid Cooper Brothers $13,000 for a fleet of old trucks, and arranged a party to celebrate the "victory."

One week later, the Cooper Brothers were back in the trucking business with new, modern equipment and a large cash reserve in the bank!

Shortly thereafter, I received a message from Jack Nohey to meet him in a saloon at Broadway near 14th

Street. Nohey was a member of the "gang." I discussed it with some of the other leaders of the union and decided to accept his invitation. There was no telling what he might have up his sleeve, but the only way to find out was to listen to him.

In the saloon, I found him at a table with another gangster named "Frenchy" who was well-known in the clothing industry, and a third man whom I didn't know and whose name they didn't mention. Later I found out this was "Lepke," who at that time had not yet become "famous."

Jack Nohey laid his cards on the table at once. "Listen, Sam. We know you're a good boy with ideals and all that, but you're also a sucker. Now we're going to give you a chance to make a real buck. Everybody else is making it, why not you? First of all, we want you to stop agitating against piece-work. Second, we want you to stop making so much noise at the Joint Board about the expressmen and the out-of-town shops. And third, if you don't, I'm sorry as hell for you!"

Then he ordered drinks, but I didn't feel very thirsty. . . . "Do what you please," I said as I walked away. "The tailors aren't afraid of your gangsters!"

A week later, as I got off the subway at 14th Street, I bumped into a crowd of people on the corner. Out of the crowd came an old tailor, running gleefully toward me with a piece of news. "It's Jack Nohey! Just killed by one of his own gang! They must have had an argument over the graft!"

"Good riddance," I said to myself, with a somewhat irreverent prayer of relief.

CHAPTER 41

A Gangster With Ethics

AFTER WOLF and Beckerman had reorganized our Local, they proceeded to terrorize the membership. The underworld ran wild in the union as well as in the shops. Hundreds of workers were thrown out of their jobs and found it impossible for a long time to get other ones.

The gangsters were "legalized." After an assault on some innocent members, they would show their "business cards" to the judge as evidence of their partnership in this or that shop. This credential always got the gangsters off scot free.

In the struggle to destroy the progressive leaders, who were exposing their brutal maneuvers, they decided to send a couple of us to the hospital. One day a certain gangster, who is now serving a life sentence, told L. Nelson, my co-worker, that he had been offered $500 for splitting our heads open — mine and L. Nelson's. But he knew, he said, that we were nothing but a couple of fools fighting for an ideal, and he didn't have the heart to hurt us. On the other hand, he said, he didn't have the heart to turn down the $500 either. So he offered us a proposition: We would appear in public with our heads swathed in bandages until he got his money; after that, he didn't care what we did.

We would never agree to such a plan, we told him, but we appreciated his thoughtfulness. But he had a compromise ready. He would settle for only one "victim"

and it didn't even have to be one of us. "Get somebody you can trust, who looks something like you, and get him to walk around for a few days with a bandaged head. I'll tell my boss I made a mistake in the dark."

We accepted his plan and selected our "stand-in." The scheme worked and our gangster collected his $500. The very next day, he even invited me and L. Nelson to be his guests for dinner at a "fancy" restaurant. . . .

Nelson order a T-bone steak, and later put the bone in his pocket. The next day, he showed the bone to the boys around the union office and told them that he had finally succeeded in "getting something" from Beckerman and his gang. . . .

CHAPTER 42

Types of Walking Delegates

TWO YEARS AFTER the Amalgamated Clothing Workers' Union was formed, there were still many tailors who were doubtful that the union would be able to overcome all its difficulties. This in itself was not healthy for the organization.

The leaders and business agents of the United Garment Workers' Union, from which the Amalgamated had split away, did not try to compete with the new union in the organization of the men in the shops. What they did do was to cooperate with the employers, and through them try to destroy the unity of the tailors and to create all sorts of problems for the Amalgamated.

The large employers immediately began to use gangsters and gangsterism against the new union. The smaller employers also were reluctant to submit to the conditions of the union. If they were too small to hire professional gangsters, they at least tried to make use of friends and family inside the shops; to "buy out" the services of certain individuals who are always ready to be bought for a few dollars or a few drinks.

In those early days, the business agents of the Amalgamated were either former "pie-cards" of the Bible House, or simple tailors out of the shops, who had little or no experience in organization and who in many cases could neither read nor write in any language.

One such business agent was a man by the name of

Kalman Friedman. This Friedman once received a complaint that in Goldman's shop on Cannon Street, the foreman, by some hanky-panky with the clock, was cheating the workers out of an hour's pay every day. So Friedman went up to put a stop to it.

Goldman's shop was on the third floor. Friedman, not being able to read made a mistake and went into Grodzonky's on the fourth. When he explained to Mr. Grodzonsky what the grievance was, the latter, unaware of Friedman's error, admitted that it was true, that yes, there was something wrong with his clock, and that he had been meaning to buy a new one for several weeks, but what he wanted to know was which one of his workers had had the effrontery to go to the union and complain about it.

By this time, Friedman had caught on to his own mistake and he settled the grievance quickly by getting Grodzonsky to agree to put in a new clock the very next morning. Then he went down to the third floor to "fix" Goldman's clock.

But the following day, Grodzonsky fired a man whom he suspected of having "informed" to the union. So Friedman went back again, this time to pull a real stoppage. At the shop meetings in Columbia Hall, it was discovered that neither one of the bosses, Grodzonsky or Goldman, had bought a new clock. They had simply switched them!

The two employers were fined 25 dollars each and it was decided that the shop chairmen should buy their own clocks and signal the men to work according to the hands of the "union timepiece."

A near-tragic incident took place with Leon Barash, another business agent. Barash was in his fifties and rather careless of his personal appearance. At union meetings, he

was the butt of a lot of jokes. He had the habit of falling asleep as soon as he sat down. From time to time, when he heard—through his sleep—a proposal being made on the floor, he would mumble almost unintelligibly: "I second the motion. . . ." Once, during an important discussion, he fell asleep and began snoring loudly. The chairman banged his gavel and shouted: "Brother Barash, if you want to sleep, go to a Turkish Bath!" Barash twitched and muttered: "Second the motion!"

Barash once discovered that in a sweatshop on Delancey Street, the shop chairman had arranged with the boss to let a number of the workers go along without paying their union dues. One of the men, Rosen, the pocket-maker, had been bragging that he had only one dues stamp in his whole book and that the union was a big bluff anyway, they didn't even know who paid dues and who didn't.

When Barash went to the shop to investigate, he went straight to Rosen and demanded to see his dues-book. Rosen gave him some story about having left it at home. But one of the operators gave Barash the wink and pointed to Rosen's coat hanging on a nail behind his machine. Barash reached for the coat and lifted the dues book out of the inside pocket. Rosen tried to snatch the book out of Barash's hand and they began to tussle. Rosen got hold of Barash's necktie and pulled. Barash gasped and turned blue. But Rosen held on to the necktie, yanking it tighter and tighter.

At this point there occurred one of those every-day acts of heroic quick-thinking which usually go unheralded. Jack Simon, another operator, sizing up the seriousness of the situation, snatched up a scissors and simply cut the necktie in two. Rosen was left holding his end of

the tie and Barash quickly caught his breath. He stood up "victoriously," waving the dues-book in his hand. There was something so comical about him and the stump of his necktie, that all the men began to laugh.

This must have hurt his pride, for he gruffly demanded: "Who cut my necktie?"

Simon, who felt proud of his deed, spoke up brightly: "It was me, and just in time, too!"

"Monday morning," ordered Barash ungratefully, "you will both appear before the Grievance Board. I'll teach you to make fun of a walking delegate!"

Monday morning, the Grievance Board fined Jack Simon five dollars for cutting Barash's necktie and Rosen, the pocket-maker, was instructed to pay up all his back dues, plus three months in advance.

But Simon appealed his fine and won his case. He then made a "settlement" with Barash: he would buy him a new necktie.

The same day, with appropriate pomp and ceremony, he presented Barash with a brand new silk tie. It cost him 25 cents.

CHAPTER 43

A Union Is Not A Saloon

EMPLOYERS are usually on the lookout for methods of dividing their workers into separate groups, the easier to exploit them. The garment bosses, for this purpose, used the division of the Amalgamated into a men's clothing union and a boy's clothing union. Helpful too for the employers was the corrupt machine of Harry Cohn, then manager of the "Children's Jacket Makers," and that of Mendl Yudelevitch of the "Kneepants Makers."

The manufacturers of men's clothing often used to send size 40 and even 44 coats to the children's clothing shops. Or size 36 and 38 trousers to the kneepants shops. The Cohns, etc., naturally were very useful in this fakery.

When the graft-plague became too serious to overlook, the national office of the Amalgamated devided to wage war against Harry Cohn and his machine. Abraham Shiplacoff, who was then on the outs with the Jewish Daily *Forward* advised us to send a committee of the union to see Hillel Rogoff, one of the editors of the paper, because Rogoff at that time was also at odds with the Ab. Cahen, editor of the *Forward*. In such a situation, he might be able to smuggle something into the paper against Harry Cohn.

Rogoff received us warmly and promised to write about the matter as soon as we gave him all the facts. But the next day, when we brought him the facts, he told us

that Harry Cohn had a lot of supporters on the paper who would never permit a campaign against him, especially since Hillman and Schlossberg were not too well liked by Ab. Cahen.

A day later, when we came to see Rogoff again, we found the same Harry Cohn sitting in his office. He had come to "use his influence" against exposing him in the paper.

Joseph Schlossberg at that time proposed to me that I write a few articles about the situation. I did so. He edited them and submitted them to David Pinsky who printed them in his newspaper, *"Di Tseit."* Schlossberg himself wrote a sharp editorial in the *"Fortshrit"* (Progress) in which he said that a union is not a saloon where every scoundrel can come in to souse and spit. We must keep the union clean and drive out the Harry Cohns and all the grafters like him. A union must be a temple, a holy place.

That same week, when I came to speak to a meeting of the Children's clothing workers in Brooklyn, I was met at the hall by some of Harry Cohn's mobsters who beat me up so badly that I had to be taken to the hospital.

Schlossberg Regrets

Harry Cohn and many of his clique were driven out of the union for a while. But his "intercessors" did not rest, neither in the union nor in the *Forward*, until they had paved the way for him to return as manager. They used this phony argument: Harry Cohn inside the union will not be able to do as much damage to the organization as he can from the outside . . . (!)

Shortly afterward, when I was about to enter a meeting called by President Hillman in the national office, I saw something which almost knocked me off my feet. A number of Amalgamated leaders were being posed for a photograph for the *Forward*. In the front row sat Joseph Schlossberg, and at his right hand sat Harry Cohn! I ducked back into another room and called in to the office: "Brother Schlossberg, you're wanted on the telephone!"

When Schlossberg came out to answer the phone, I whispered feverishly: "Don't you realize what it will mean for you and the workers in the shops when they see the picture of you with that racketeer!" Schlossberg, confused and innocent-like, half-closed his eyes and murmured: "What can I do now? They're taking him back into the union!"

"Take my advice. Get in the elevator and go downstairs and wait in one of the offices. I'll go back in there and tell them you were called away on an emergency and to take the pictures without you!"

Schlossberg took my advice, except that he used the stairs. The next day the picture appeared in the *Forward* with Harry Cohn prominently displayed. But Joseph Schlossberg was not in it.

CHAPTER 44

Playing Ball With the Gangsters

IN 1924, SERIOUS changes began to appear in the progressive Amalgamated. A number of its leaders were still militant and led a struggle on various fronts against the employers and their associations, as well as against the non-union shops and the competition of the out-of-town factories. Also, the battle continued with the *Forward* and quite often with Schlessinger of the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union, who looked with envious eyes at the Amalgamated. In addition, gangsterism in the unions had grown more and more widespread. Gangsters had become "partners" in a great many businesses where their "investment" consisted of protecting the scab shops which worked for the big manufacturers. Some of the union leaders affected would keep quiet because they had connections with the gangsters. Two of the most notorious underworld characters, the Lepke and Gura gang, were "prominent" in the business.

The rank-and-file workers were ready to fight back, to help the honest union leaders. Hundreds of workers used to come out in the streets to block truckloads of material which was being sent to the non-union shops. Skirmishes with gangsters and racketeers ensued in which trucks were overturned by the embittered tailors. But A. Beckerman, together with David Wolff and Harry Cohn, who worked hand-in-glove with the gangsters, forced the na-

tional office of the Amalgamated to change this policy and start making compromises.

August Balanca, leader of the Italian workers in the Amalgamated who was regarded as a progressive, telephoned me in the shop one morning to come to a conference at the Union Square Hotel. I took a committee with me and went to the hotel. At the conference Balanca tried to get our agreement to instituting piece-work in the trade and to an increase in union dues. We spoke out sharply against his request almost before the words were out of his mouth. We pointed out the sorry situation in the union, where the Lepke gangsters were becoming more and more active.

Balanca put on a terrific act. Our attitude had hurt him deeply. He was on the verge of fainting. He pleaded for a glass of warm milk to be brought up to him at once or he would collapse on the spot. We humored him and called the hotel desk to send up the milk. But his plea that we agree to piece-work and the unnecessary increase in dues was turned down flatly.

The next day Sidney Hillman himself came to meet with us at the same hotel. He immediately got down to business, trying to prove to us that the *Forward* clique was out to break the union, that they had the betrayer Meyer Sheinfield and a whole gang on their side, ready to carry on a campaign inside the union in favor of piecework, and that we could take the wind out of their sails by introducing the idea ourselves.

And in order to give the *Forward* a slap in the face, Hillman added, he would give the progressive group three seats on the Board of Directors of the union, and he would appoint me and Philip Wiener organizers in the national office of the Amalgamated.

The answer of the progressive group was an emphatic NO. We refused to sell ourselves for jobs.

We Bring the Facts

Instead of making deals, we presented to Joseph Schlossberg, then national secretary-treasurer of the union, a number of affidavits containing facts about graft, corruption, extortion of "gifts" from workers and employers, and "silent partnerships" between bosses and union officials. We showed him how Beckerman, Orlovsky, David Wolff, Harry Cohn, Jackson and others were working hand-in-hand to undermine the union. We showed that former leaders of the union, now employers and representatives of the Employers' Association, were go-betweens in this graft racket.

Schlossberg read and accepted the affidavits, and thanked us profusely. The next day we learned that instead of testifying against "Knockout" Beckerman and the others of his ilk, we would have to follow their orders.

The national office had just appointed Beckerman and David Wolff leaders of the union and Hollander as their lieutenant.

Beckerman immediately proclaimed himself dictator of the union and began to enforce his orders with a "strong arm," especially against the progressive workers in the best organization—Local 5 of the operators. Hundreds of workers were left jobless and demoralized. Rates were cut. Scabs and sweatshops again began to bloom.

When the clique tried to have me fired, all the workers at Kohn and Lang, to a man, stood by me and would not permit it. Workers in the other shops did the same for the progressives. So Beckerman sent up twenty strong-

arm men and they carried out a pogrom in the shop. The same "plan of action" was followed in other shops.

The *Forward* supported and encouraged their Brother Beckerman. The manager even greeted Beckerman as follows: "We ought to wash Beckerman's feet and drink the water!"

Whether they drank the water I don't know. But wash him they did, and they had a steady job. They continued to whitewash him even after Beckerman declared war on the National Office of the Amalgamated, where he later tried to capture power and become the "fuehrer" with the help of gangsters and racketeers.

It is interesting that when the Amalgamated took Beckerman to court for racketeering, the national leaders of the union used the evidence and affidavits which we had gathered and prepared. (He was found guilty, fined and sentenced to prison.)

Mr. L. Hollander had better luck. He always went out of his way to be a good yes-man. And he paid close attention to the role he was playing at the time.

It is worth mentioning too that when Abe Cahan, editor of the Jewish *Daily Forward,* on June 29, 1938, wrote an inflammatory article in the *New York Times* against Sidney Hillman, Brother Hollander signed a statement condemning his friend and comrade Abe Cahan. Moreover, he forced the *Forward* to print it.

"We deplore the fact that Abe Cahan, editor of the *Forward,* has joined hands with, and assists, the open and concealed fascists, open-shoppers and red-baiters. Abe Cahan's statements about President Hillman are shameful lies. The open-shop manufacturers of the South would be happy to pay Cahan a lot of money for such statements. They would be able to make good use of them

(and they did – S. L.) in order to frighten unsophisticated workers in the open-shop areas where the union is conducting its organizing campaigns."

Of course Louis Hollander did this to protect his own position in the Amalgamated. What he said about Abe Cahan applied equally to many others.

Brother "Knockout" Beckerman and Hollander were not content with taking our livelihood away; they were determined to expel us from the union and reorganize the local, because they knew that the local would stand behind its progressive leadership. So in January 1925 the entire local was excluded from the Joint Board. William Abrams, Louis Nelson and myself were suspended from the union.

In this fight, Local 5 was supported by the big union locals of the Italian workers, Locals 63, and by Locals 24, 80 and 54. We were also helped by the workers in the large shops such as V. J. Freedman, Bashevitz, V. F. Goodman, Kohn and Lang, Ackerman, Witty Bros., and scores of others.

Also suspended were assistant managers S. Zutkoff and Philip Weiner. (The latter made his peace soon afterward with Beckerman and became one of his lieutenants.) A number of business agents were also dismissed for their opposition to gangster methods. Some of them later were converted to the Beckerman-Hollander "principles."

The "Litviner" local, which helped in this fight against graft, corruption and terror, was mercilessly harassed, and nine of its active members expelled.

The terror was so fierce, that when a group of unemployed tailors once congregated outside the Labor Bureau on Tenth Street (that was the hiring center for a time) patrol wagons were summoned and 24 of the men arrested.

In court, the complaint made by the corrupt leadership was that too many unemployed at one spot could stage a demonstration against them! There was a bit of tragi-comedy connected with this incident: By mistake, a cantor who had come out of a nearby synagogue was arrested with the group of unemployed tailors.

For the slightest word of criticism, members were terrorized, literally beaten by strong-arm men.

The employers received generous compensation from the union leaders for helping them in this betrayal: piece-work, rate reductions, scab shops.

David Wolff (who gave up his garage business), together with Harry Cohn, Beckerman and others, made a good business out of the union.

CHAPTER 45

Alive At My Own Funeral

ON ONE OCCASION, we got word that the racketeer and his gang was planning a meeting to reorganize our local union. We realized that they would try to keep the progressives out of the meeting in Arion Hall, Brooklyn, so we devised a counter-move. I was to dress up in a woman's clothing and smuggle myself in with the women who would be attending the meeting. Once I got into the meeting, I was to wait for the proper moment and then take the floor. We knew that the workers at the meeting would be with us, if we could get to talk to them.

But at the last minute, we changed our strategy and it was decided that I and others go to the meeting as ourselves, without any disguises. I changed my garb and went to the hall. The members were streaming into the meeting, and although Beckerman and the bureaucrats had prepared their gangsters and special police, the workers forced a way through for us. And when one of the thugs jabbed me in the chest with a fountain pen, a group of workers lifted me to their shoulders and literally carried me into the meeting hall. Abe Beckerman, together with his gangsters, were so afraid of the angry workers that they jumped out the windows.

While I lay unconscious backstage, a doctor was called. As soon as the doctor arrived, the gang managed to put the electricity out of commission and the hall grew pitch

dark. Some of our people thought quickly and found a place nearby that sold candles. They brought in a boxful and the meeting proceeded by candlelight.

When I began to come to, they carried me out front to the meeting, bench and all, to show that we had the rank and file with us and were controlling the meeting. But being still under the effect of the injection, which the doctor had given me, I could see myself only as a fresh corpse, with the funeral candles burning around my bier. Whereupon I fainted again.

When they brought me home, I was still "out." The experience of attending my own "funeral" was too much even for me.

CHAPTER 46

The Idealist

For a Time, the cooperative movement was very popular among Jewish working people. There was a lot of talk about building cooperative restaurants, apartments, summer-resorts, bakeries; groups were constantly being organized for cooperative projects of one kind or another.

At that time, I made friends with a tailor who worked in a cleaning-store on Monroe Street. His name was Asher. He told me that he had come to New York from Chicago with the express purpose of participating in the cooperative movement. One day, he met me in the Pig Market and asked me if I wanted to take a job in his shop.

"In *your* shop?" I asked incredulously. "When did you become a boss?"

"Me a boss? Not on Rockefeller's life! We've formed a cooperative. We're working for society."

While we stood there talking, another friend of his, an Anarchist, joined us and listened to our conversation.

"You ought to be ashamed, Asher! What's happened to you, anyway? A boss!"

"Me, a boss?" Asher protested again. "Rockefeller should live so!"

"Well, what are you talking about then?"

"I'm telling you. I finally got the chance to fulfill my ideal of working for the cooperative movement!"

"What cooperative movement?"

"Me and Melzack and Glotzin have opened a cooperative shop," he explained. "We already have four other silent partners and we hope," he said proudly, "that our ideal will grow and grow. . . ."

His friend, the Anarchist, burst out laughing. "Opening cooperative shops is an ideal? It's a disgrace, that's what it is!"

Asher insisted. "You ignoramus! The ideal is to build cooperatives, isn't it? So why do you come and tell me it's a disgrace?

"*I'm* an ignoramus? Since when is a corporation a cooperative? You're building a business, not a workers' cooperative, you muddlehead!"

Asher began to see a glimmer of light and grew silent. A look of concern came into his eyes. He had invested his entire capital of 140 dollars in this "ideal" of his and now he was being told that instead of a cooperative it was a corporation.

Nevertheless, he asked me again if I wouldn't come up to his "cooperative" and go to work there. He promised that he would ask his other partners to buy him out and keep him on as an honest workingman. So I went up with him.

Once in the shop, however, I saw immediately that Asher had already "learned the trade" of being a boss. He had caught on to all the tricks. But the shop was a model of disorganization. All the partners, silent and vocal, tried to run the business. They fell all over each other. If one said day, the other said night. They didn't believe each other. They didn't trust each other. They accused each other of loafing. And the loudest accuser was Asher, who called the others "parasites." If it weren't for him, he said,

they would all have been in the Pig Market long ago looking for jobs.

One afternoon a van delivered some bundles to the shop and the expressman called up: "Mr. Asher! Mr. Asher! Come get your stuff!" Whereupon all the partners went on strike and refused to go down for the bundles. Let Asher do it, they complained. If the expressman recognizes no one but "Mr. Asher" as boss, then let *him* bring up the bundles!

It happened to be raining that day; the bundles of work were lying out on the sidewalk getting soaked, the expressman was yelling "Mr. Asher" and no one made a move to go down to get them. So a few real workers in the shop, who knew that if the cloth was ruined they would lose a day's work, consulted each other silently and went down to bring up the bundles.

Another time, this superfluity of bosses cost a finisher a day's pay. It happened this way: a "greenhorn" was hired on the Pig Market one day by an employer who had a shop in the same building as the "cooperative." This boss took a deposit of fifty cents from his new employee, as was the custom in those days, to make sure he would show up for work. The finisher came to work the next day but he had some difficulty finding the right place. The building had four stories. The steps and the corridors creaked and swayed like a "loop-de-loop." The tiny gaslight on one of the floors gasped like a candle about to expire.

So the greenhorn lost his way and instead of going up to the shop on the fourth floor he entered the shop of Asher, Melzack, etc., on the third floor. He opened the door and one of the bosses asked him: "What do you want?"

"I'm the finisher. I was hired yesterday."

So one boss yelled to the other: "A finisher. Talk to him!"

The finisher walked over to the second boss, who "talked to him." "What do you want?"

"I'm the finisher."

So the second boss, assuming that the first boss had hired a new finisher, showed him where to sit. The new man took off his coat, put on his apron and sat down to work with the other finishers.

At six o'clock, he approached Mr. Asher to discuss rates, as well as to get his half-a-dollar back. Asher inspected him cynically.

"Friend, who are you and what in blazes do you want? I'm too busy to listen to your foolishness. Go talk to my partner!"

The man began to sweat and went over to Glotzin. "Mister, my half-a-dollar I gave. . . ."

"I don't do the hiring around here!" said Glotzin brusquely "Probably Melzack hired you. Go talk to him . . . over there. . . ."

Melzack listened to the man's story and sent him back to Asher. This time it struck Asher funny and he burst out laughing. "Who needs another finisher? Finisher-shminisher! Mister, if you hang around here much longer you'll get run over!"

"If you don't need me," the finisher pleaded, "at least pay me for the half a day and give me back my fifty cents. . . ."

Asher lost patience. "Melzack, throw this nut out before I hit him with this iron!"

The greenhorn stood his ground and rummaged through his pockets for a piece of paper. "Look—here's

the address . . . the man told me to come to work. . . ."

When Melzak looked at the paper and saw where the finisher had made his mistake, he suggested to Asher that they pay the man something for his work. Asher ridiculed the idea.

"What for? He's supposed to be working for Karp—why should *we* pay him?"

The finisher bit his lips woefully and went upstairs to Karp's.

The following morning, Mr. Karp came in to complain to Asher. "How do you like that! A man gives me a half-dollar deposit to come to work, I wait a whole day for him and he doesn't come, he goes and works a whole day elsewhere and then asks me for his fifty cents!"

"So what did you do?" asked Asher.

"What did you expect me to do? I threw him out on his ear!"

When Asher told him that he hadn't paid the finisher anything for his work either, they both laughed and laughed in enjoyment of their little joke.

CHAPTER 47

No Wages, No Rent!

THE UNION once led a strike in a contracting shop on Belmont Avenue in Brooklyn. During this strike we learned the story of how the boss, Mr. Penzack, became a contractor.

It seems that Mr. and Mrs. Penzack were out one Saturday afternoon looking for living quarters. On a house on Belmont Avenue, they noticed a sign: "FOUR ROOMS TO LET." They went in to inquire, and the first thing Mrs. Penzack asked was: "Is this a quiet street?" For the sake of her small children, she said, she wanted a street "without tumult." The janitor assured her that this street was "like in the country." So the Penzacks gave him a five-dollar deposit and told him to go ahead and paint the rooms.

Several days later, when Mrs. Penzack came to measure the floors for "oilcloth," her hair stood on end. The day they had rented the rooms had been a Saturday and the street was truly quiet. But now she found a noisy marketplace in front of the house, with dozens of pushcarts and unsightly heaps of trash.

She went running back to Mr. Penzack and swore by her soul that she would never, never move her family into a street like that. "Go right back and get your five dollars!" she insisted. Mr. Penzack hot-footed it down to Belmont Avenue, but the janitor refused to return the deposit. Mr. Penzack suddenly had an inspiration. For



Belmont Avenue—"A Quiet Street"

some time he had been carrying a plan in his head to open his own shop. Why not here on Belmont Avenue and right now? It was a God-given opportunity. He did not argue any longer with the janitor; in fact, he informed him quite affably that he would return the next day with his "furniture." The next morning he installed three sewing machines, two tables and a few work-baskets. The day after, he bought up some "remnants" and began his career as a manufacturer of knee-pants. When the first pair of knee-pants was completed, he went out and sold them—right on Belmont Avenue. Shortly thereafter, he hired a couple of *landsleit* and his business grew apace.

Later he moved to a loft, still on Belmont Avenue, and put in twelve new machines. Then he bought a home on Rockaway Avenue and invited some of his *landsleit* to become his tenants. Every month he deducted their rent from their wages and when he anticipated a slack season, he would make these deductions weeks in advance.

When the Amalgamated set out to organize the Brooklyn shops, they eventually came to Penzack's. Mr. Penzack made a speech to his workers and reminded them of everything he had done for them. "If it weren't for me, you would never have had money for your rent. If I hadn't given you my old clothes you wouldn't have had anything to wear in synagogue. So you shouldn't even think about a union in my shop!"

But apparently his employees assessed his "favors" in a different light, because they all joined the union. When the Brownsville shops went out on strike, Penzack's workers were among the most dedicated participants.

On the first of the following month, Mr. Penzack appeared at a shop meeting. "Looks like he's come to

settle the strike," was the swift rumor among the men.

Mr. Penzack asked for the floor. "I want my rent," he began without any preliminaries. "If I don't get my rent by the day after tomorrow, you'll all be out in the street!"

There was loud muttering and one of Penzack's *landsleit* stood up to speak. "If we're not getting wages, we can't pay you rent! And even when we were getting paid, there wasn't enough for the rent! Every week you took the rent out of my pay, there wasn't enough left for the table!"

Mr. Penzack defended himself. "That's not my fault! I never stinted on the thread or the gas. The trouble with you people is you don't want to work. If you'd put in more time, you'd have more money. And now," he laughed sarcastically, "your union wants to cut the hours even more!"

The workers laughed right back at him and he left in a huff.

A few days later, several of his *landsleit* were evicted from their rooms. A "Ladies' Auxiliary" in Brownsville immediately organized the tenants and began to picket Mr. Penzack's house, where the belongings of the evicted workers already stood on the sidewalk. Mr. Penzack complained bitterly that he could not understand the sense of such a picket line. And no wonder. It was really a new weapon in the hands of the union: a double-barreled picket-line, with the husbands picketing the shop while the wives picketed the boss's home.

But it was a weapon that worked.

CHAPTER 48

An Anti-Union Fortress

FRUHOF BROTHERS, on 8th Avenue and 14th Street, was another large shop "with a reputation." This shop, employing several hundred workers, manufactured the most expensive line of men's clothing of that period. One hundred dollars for a Fruhof suit was not unusual. But the working conditions at Fruhof's were worse than in the shabbiest sweatshop.

There were four Fruhof brothers. Their father, more than ninety years old, used to walk through the shop ostensibly tidying up, but actually he served as still another eye to check on the workers. The Fruhof family was descended from one of the early German-Jewish immigrants. They held on stubbornly to their business, long after the entire industry had slipped out of German hands. Anticipating present practice, Fruhof Brothers issued a sort of house-organ which they sent out to all their customers.

One of the brothers was a deputized sheriff. This gave him the legal right to strut around with a loaded revolver in his pocket. The other three didn't look like sissies either.

When the Amalgamated leaders first began to plan the organization of the clothing factories on 14th Street, it was their hope that they could succeed in making at least a "preferential shop" out of Fruhof's which in plain

language meant a nominal union shop without union conditions.

I was one of those chosen to take a job at Fruhof Brothers in order to help organize it. It was very easy in this shop to "talk union." The conditions were terrible. The workers considered their employers parasites. Even the sub-contractors had little love for the Fruhofs; what's more, the sub-contractors actually hoped the union would win, so that they too, might be treated a little more decently. By this time, there were women working at Fruhof's as machine operators. And a lovely girl named Esther, who had come from Chicago, proved to be a great help to us in organizing the workers. Through her, we were able to get union leaflets into the women's washrooms and union "propaganda" into the talk of the women.

One of the newer workers in the shop was an Italian fellow, Paul, a former prize-fighter. He was brought in by one of the sub-contractors to learn the pressing craft and he immediately became one of the best organizers for the union in that shop.

One night we called a shop meeting to vote on a strike. The meeting was held at Astoria Hall on Fourth Street. Some of the leaders of the union were extremely skeptical about this shop. They doubted that any appreciable number of workers would turn out to the meeting. Much to their surprise, the hall was packed. Among the people in the hall we noticed the usual number of scab-agents from the shop. One of these, whom the workers feared most, was a presser, Tony, a bruiser of a man, who used to bully anyone in sight without the slightest reason. At this meeting, the role of every person in the shop came to light, and when the meeting decided in favor of a

strike, the company strong-arm men were on their feet at once terrorizing the workers with knives and clubs.

Paul, the ex-prize-fighter turned presser, had been sitting by the door. When he saw what the Fruhof gangsters were up to, he sprang up like a cat. In an instant, he had ripped the legs off a chair; just as quickly the gangsters began to scatter like scared rats. Tony jumped out of a window with his revolver in his hand. The next morning, Fruhof's shop on 14th Street was well-attended by police. The Fruhof's attempts to lure some of the workers into the shop with phony promises didn't work. A great help to us was the blunt refusal of the elevator men to carry scabs. And the "sheriff," marching back and forth with his revolver in his holster and his badge on his chest, did his own cause more harm than good. The strike stayed solid.

After two days, the company settled with the union and became a "preferential shop," but there was one condition Fruhofs did have to meet: to pay the strikers for the two days they were out. The workers voted to turn this money over to war relief.

When we entered the shop victoriously the next morning, old Mr. Fruhof was overheard saying to his son: "If I were younger, I would have hung myself on a rope before I'd have given in to the union!"

CHAPTER 49

Dreams of Anti-Union Employers

SOON AFTER THE first World War, a number of employers in the men's clothing factories in New York began to dream up ways of circumventing the conditions which the Amalgamated had managed to establish by that time.

Fruhof Brothers, not content with the "inconvenience" of a preferential shop, immediately took steps to liberate themselves. But the hundreds of workers in that shop had already begun to taste the real meaning of unionism and they began to demand more rights, not less; a real union shop, not a mere skeleton. They saw the danger to themselves in having the company able to pit one worker against another. The first demand was that the company hire its new employees through the union. They also determined to abolish the system of sub-contracting and to keep close watch on the hours of work.

At that time, I was shop chairman of Fruhof Brothers. One evening, one of the brothers called me into his office. For a few moments he talked vaguely about shop matters; then suddenly he pulled a wad of bills out of his pocket and tossed it on the table. "Get some sense into your head, my boy, and you'll soon have a share in the business, too!"

I became so frightened that I shouted at the top of my voice: "You can't buy me! I'm not a grafter!" and ran out of the office. Outside the door, I almost knocked down a detective who had been stationed there for the

purpose of catching me red-handed. But now there was nothing he could do. The plot hadn't worked.

When I told the workers what had happened, they decided it wasn't safe for me to go home alone. Paul, the ex-prize-fighter, and Bennie, an active union man in the shop, began to argue with the detective. The office-girl picked up the telephone to call the police. Bennie, in his anxiety to prevent the call, ripped out not only the telephone wire but the electric wire as well and all the lights in the shop went out. A committee of workers then surrounded me and we marched down the steps and over to the offices of the Joint Board.

At the union office, A. Shiplacoff, the manager of the Joint Board, revealed a secret: Fruhof Brothers had been demanding the removal of the shop chairman; they wanted all grievances to be handled by an "Impartial Chairman." Shiplacoff assured us the Amalgamated was prepared to defend my position in the shop "even if it cost the union 50,000 dollars." It was decided that the next morning a union committee would pick me up at my home and escort me to the shop.

It was winter-time and very cold. When I got home that night on Rockaway Avenue in Brooklyn, I was coming down with a cold and sore throat and went to bed applying hot compresses. In the middle of the night, we were startled out of our sleep by terror-filled cries which scared us half to death: "Sam! Sam!" With all sorts of anti-union crimes racing through my head, and the compresses flopping around my neck, I went downstairs to open the door, but not before I had posted lookouts at the windows to call for help if necessary.

At the door I found only one man, freezing, frantic and desperate, who turned out to be a neighbor on the

same street, looking for a plumber. It seems that the severe cold had burst a waterpipe in his house and he had gone racing out to find Sam the Plumber. Purely by mistake, he had knocked at my door instead. . . .

In the morning, the union committee appeared at my house and escorted me to the shop, sore throat and all. We knew there would be no work done that day, because the workers were infuriated by the insolent demands of the Fruhof Brothers. They felt instinctively that if the company succeeded in removing the shop chairman, all the gains hitherto won would be nullified. We found them milling around outside the shop, refusing to go in to work.

As we approached the building, the Fruhof brother with the badge — the "Sheriff" — called out to one of his strong-arm men: "There he is! Get him away from here! I don't want him in my shop!" But Paul and Bennie, solid as a wall, kept him away from me. One of the workers hailed a taxi, threw me into it, and called out: "Everybody to a shop meeting at the Manhattan Lyceum!"

At the meeting I lay down on a bench, shaking with chills and fever, and listened to former scabs, sub-contractors and slaves singing praises to the union. Mr. Reich, a former sub-contractor of lining-makers, wept pleadingly: "Don't desert us! I don't want to be a slave-driver any more! My little boy has gotten used to seeing me at home every evening!"

Levin, a finisher, described how he had wanted to ask a rabbi for permission to work on Saturday and how his wife had stopped him from going to the rabbi and herself ruled that if it was necessary to work on Saturday to feed her and their five children, then he could break

the Sabbath. "Now," he cried out, "the union let's me keep my Sabbath holy! Don't let them desecrate my Sabbath again!"

Shiplacoff, the Joint Board manager, made a speech and "guaranteed us 100%" that Fruhof Brothers would never, never be allowed to run a non-union shop.

Several days later, when I felt well enough to go back to work, I was invited by Shiplacoff to come to see him at his office. After a few words of flattery and praise for my work, he informed me he had settled the strike and agreed to the company's demand to eliminate the shop chairman.

Eventually, this resulted in the elimination of the union, too. Fruhof Brothers went along this way for a long time, fighting the organization of their shop, until they gradually "disappeared from the map."

CHAPTER 50

Politics

THE LEADERS of the trade-union movement in 1918 still held to the Gompers policy of "no politics in the union" and believed instead in the so-called tactic of "supporting your friends and opposing your enemies."

The Amalgamated Clothing Workers' Union immediately from its inception took a progressive look at this question and reacted in quite an opposite manner. The leaders of the Amalgamated determined not only to participate in political elections by supporting one candidate and opposing another but actually, as a union of workers, to conduct class-actions against the political parties of the employers. (This was stated in so many words in the preamble of the first Amalgamated constitution.)

Like many of the other young people in Local 156, I threw myself into the election campaign for Meyer London, Jacob Pankin, Morris Hillquit and others. We regarded the work of agitating for Socialism as our sacred duty, not only as members of the Socialist Party but as trade unionists. Our work consisted of spreading literature, speaking to the Jewish masses at street-corner meetings, organizing watchers at the polls and often standing guard at meetings to protect our candidates from the gangsters and "bums" of the Republican Party and Tammany Hall.

The Amalgamated election headquarters was on Delancey Street. Every evening after work, we would go to

this headquarters, whence we would be dispatched by automobile to various meetings. Among the speakers were D. Oshinsky, L. Hollander, H. Leventhal, N. Walf, S. Brownstein and several others. After several such assignments, I noticed that the managers of the campaign would drive us to the corner, set up the platform, toss out the literature and the placards and then drive off somewhere to enjoy themselves.

We brought up the matter at the Joint Board and pointed out that we could save money by hiring a horse and wagon, keeping it at the meeting and using it to haul back the paraphernalia to headquarters. This would be cheaper and much more efficient than automobiles, we argued.

The next evening, when we arrived at headquarters, everyone was again assigned to various automobiles to take them to the meetings, everyone that is, except David Oshinsky and I. For us, they had prepared a horse and wagon! When I demanded an explanation, they replied cynically: "People who don't have sense enough to know better can ride with horses!" Our further complaints were to no avail.

One evening the campaign manager informed us that on Saturday night, after all the meetings were over, all the campaign workers were to gather at East Broadway and Clinton Street. From there we would go to stage a favorable demonstration at the home of a candidate (who shall here remain nameless). He gave us detailed instructions on how to carry the placards through the streets, what slogans to shout, and when to call out the candidate's name. When we came to his home we were to raise an insistent clamor for the candidate to come out and speak.

We carried out the instructions to the letter. At mid-

night, we organized the audiences of the street-corner meetings into one mass procession and set out to the accompaniment of all the appropriate slogans and shouts.

When we arrived at the proper address, we halted and began our insistent and repetitious demand for the candidate. A window in an upper story opened and the clamor swelled. Suddenly, from the open window, a shower of assorted bottles, with and without water, and a storm of garbage, potato peelings, epithets and maledictions, came down upon our startled and heaven-turned heads.

Woefully crestfallen and disillusioned, we fled the scene. It was not until the next day that we learned that our "guide" had led us to the wrong address. Worst of all, the candidate himself came to us the following morning complaining bitterly. He had sat up all night waiting for us, so that he could come out in his pajamas on the fire-escape and make a speech to us. . . .

CHAPTER 51

Guests for Passover

WHEN A CLOTHING WORKER said he was "working for Pharaoh," his fellow-workers knew he was referring to the contractor Leyb Guzik on Cherry Street.

Leyb Guzik was an old-time contractor who had been in business many years, but nobody liked to work for him. He was the kind of man who constantly flaunted his piety, while in reality he was an inhuman, embittered slave-driver. Someone once complained to him that he was driving his workers to an early grave and making children fatherless. He replied quite serenely: "It's all right. I'm president of the Orphans' Home and it costs me plenty every year."

He was always ready to contribute to some charity—out of someone else's pocket. At a time when his 80 employees were starving, living on handouts and charity organizations, he built his reputation among his *landsleit* as a generous giver.

Saturdays his shop was closed, so he used to invite all his cronies to his home for an after-synagogue drink and snack. The synagogue was not far from his elegant home on Bedford Avenue in Brooklyn. His table was always laden with good whisky, cake, fish and fresh *chaleh.* And Mrs. Guzik was always ready to show off her "specialties"—*petchah* (a delicacy of calf's feet) and marinated fish.

On Monday mornings, Guzik would recount the names of those who had been at his home for *Shabbos.* As

Yosheh, the presser, himself a devout Jew, once said: "Guzik, *der guter Guzik,* on *Shabbos* he gives his guests *l'chayim* (to life); during the week he gives his workers *l'movess* (to death)."

But on the eve of a holiday, Guzik would give his workers in the shop a treat, too. He would set out bottles of schnapps and cookies and various delicacies appropriate for the holiday. On *Shevuoth* (Pentecost, a Jewish holiday), his wife would bring a big platter of *blintzes* and *kreplach.* On *Yom Kippur* eve, she would come to the shop with a freshly-baked *chaleh* and a tremendous cake, with a little ladder on it "going up to heaven." And on *Purim,* of course, dozens and dozens of three-cornered *hamentashen.*

On Passover, however, Guzik always outdid himself. Weeks before the holiday, he would hang out a sign in front of his shop: "ALL WHO ARE HUNGRY COME AND EAT—LEYB GUZIK GIVES HIS WORKERS MATZOS AND WINE FREE FOR PASSOVER!" And of course his annual contributions for *moat chitim* (charity), in the synagogue and among his *landsleit,* were famous throughout New York and Brooklyn too.

Once, when Guzik was adding up for an audience of his workers the sums he distributed on Passover so that Jews would have matzos for the holiday, an old tailor stroked his snow-white beard thoughtfully and said, half to himself: "If Leyb Guzik were to ask me I would tell him it is a greater *mitzva* (a good deed) to provide his workers all year long with bread than to give them matzos for a few days. . . ." Guzik heard him, and stood transfixed as though lightning has singed him.

How surprised Guzik was, then, a few days before Passover, at a time when he was so busy distributing charity.

to find a strike breaking out right in his own shop. This was the first time in his long career that his workers had defied him. He could not believe it. All the workers, young and old, men and women, free-thinkers and devout Jews—all went out. Even Hirshke, the presser, with whom Guzik often held long discussions about the divine origin of wealth and poverty, and about the primacy of the other-world over this-world—even Hirshke went out on strike, too. What's more, it was the same Hirshke who philosophized, at the first shop meeting: "If it's really so, as Guzik says, that this world is nothing, that the main thing is the next world, then let him be so good as to exchange me a few years of the next world for several good years of this one. . ."

The strike excited the imagination of the workers. They began to use "tough words" about "making the shop kosher," . . . "sweeping out the *chometz*" . . . "asking the real four questions" . . . "pouring out their wrath" and other such cryptic phrases from the holiday tradition.

Leyb Guzik immediately placed an ad in the papers for scabs. But Yudl Fine, who had been elected shop-chairman, was not asleep either. He was firmly and fully convinced that the slaves in the shop of this modern Pharaoh must liberate themselves as did the ancient Hebrews in Egypt.

On the day before Passover, a few scabs showed up at Guzik's shop and said they had come from out-of-town, ready to go to work. Guzik welcomed them warmly, and since they were away from home, invited them to spend the *Seder* evenings with him at *his* home. After the holiday, he said, they could start work.

The first *Seder* at Leyb Guzik's house was sumptuously-prepared, as usual. The tables were richly decorated and

the high pillows on his chair were as elegant as those of any king. The wine sparkled merrily in the crystal decanters. And as he walked into the room with his guests, a camera flashed brightly to record the event.

The pages of the *Haggadah* turned and, of course, the wine was not put to shame either. The guests, especially, seemed to be particularly thirsty, so much so that Guzik exclaimed in a somewhat annoyed tone: "You should only work as good as you drink!"

This work-a-day thought released the customary holiday restriction on shop-talk and Leyb gradually began to discuss the strike with his guests. "You won't have a thing to worry about," he boasted, as he took a paper out of his pocket. "This is an injunction against those ungrateful strikers—they won't even be able to get near my shop!

One of the guests filled the glasses again and made a toast: "If that's really so, let's drink *l'chayim* to the injunction!"

Guzik mumbled something and went ahead with the reading of the *Haggadah*. "Open the door for our unseen guest, Elijah the Prophet, he said to his wife.

As Mrs. Guzik opened the door and Mr. Guzik stood up, cup in hand, to the accompaniment of the flashing camera, a whole line of striking Elijahs marched into the house one after the other. The guests, also cups in hand, stood up too, and greeted them: *"L'chayim, Eliyohu Hanovi!"* One of them reached over, pulled the injunction from Guzik's pocket and handed it to "Eliyohu" who, as he tore the injunction to bits, dropped the pieces on the table to the accompaniment of the traditional recital of the ten plagues. . . .

Immediately after Passover, Guzik's became a union shop. His slaves had finally marched out of Egypt. . . .

CHAPTER 52

Sidelines

AT WOLL & RUBACK'S on Third Street, they made men's and ladies' clothing, workshirts, fur-pieces and a variety of other garments, but the one thing the workers at the shop did *not* make was a living. So they had to depend on "sidelines" to supplement their wages.

Harry, a finisher, used to tour the restaurants after his regular working hours, peddling his wares: handkerchiefs, suspenders, combs, socks, buckles, purses, etc. Naturally, he brought his goods into the shop with him every morning. Finkel, another finisher, used to sell jewelry on installments: rings, watches, bracelets, diamonds, fancy candlesticks, or whatever else his customers wanted, even cash, if they were willing to pay enough interest. And he, too, brought his business into the shop. If you wanted an item which Finkel didn't happen to have at the time, he would take off his apron and slip out to his brother-in-law's store on Grand Street. There, at the Peddlers' Supply House, he was sure to find anything anybody could ever want.

Alex, a sleevemaker, sold tablecloths, napkins, curtains, blouses, skirts, etc. Myer-Leyb, the presser, sold whisky, and wine for *Kiddush* and *Havdalah*. If you had a celebration in your family, a wedding or *Bris* (circumcision), Myer-Leyb was your man.

Whenever there was any free time in the shop, the place turned into a veritable fair, a market place. And

there was plenty of free time. Workers from other shops used to come into this shop, too, to see what the peddlers had to offer.

Mister Ruback, one of the bosses, was not at all averse to this traffic! In fact, he was quite pleased with it. His pleasure stemmed from Myer-Leyb's schnapps business. Mr. Ruback loved his "bitter drop" and he could kill a bottle as efficiently as the next man. Myer-Leyb, who also used to supply other peddlers with whisky, was a walking distillery, and he kept his stock in the boss's office. On his person, he always kept a bottle and a whisky glass. He very rarely took a drink himself; he enjoyed watching other people drink, even when they tricked him and didn't pay. Myer-Leyb was too trusting; his customers took advantage of him, and so did Mr. Ruback, who, after drinking copiously from the jugs which Myer-Leyb left in his office, often replenished them with tap-water. Myer-Leyb once delivered a gallon of this "half-and-half" to a wedding and he almost had to leave town.

All these tricks finally got his goat and one day the good-natured Myer-Leyb started swinging his fists at a fellow-presser. The walking delegate of the union stopped the fight and ordered Myer-Leyb to appear before the Grievance Board and to cease and desist from bringing whisky into the shop. But the next day Myer-Leyb came to work happy as a lark and ready for business. "It's all straightened out," he announced to the other pressers at the table. And this is how he straightened it out: Among the pressers there was one known as "Bag-o-bones" who was a tremendous guzzler. Myer-Leyb informed everybody happily that he had given Bag-o-bones a gallon of whisky, in return for which he, Bag-o-bones, would be Myer-Leyb's "business-manager" and handle any problems that

arose . . . "and let there be peace from now on and forevermore," he concluded.

Eventually Woll & Ruback went on strike. The workers were called to a meeting at Astoria Hall. They came to the meeting as instructed, but with them came their sidelines. And since there were a lot of ready-made customers right there in the hall, they opened their cases and displayed their merchandise. Business boomed, except for Myer-Leyb; he was forbidden to sell his wares, either in the corridors or — of course — in the hall itself.

The one who seemed to be doing the most business was Finkel, the jewelry salesman. A rising demand for jewelry developed among the strikers —— caused by a sudden epidemic of birthdays, engagements, weddings, etc. And these rings, bracelets and brooches were all being bought "to pay out." Finkel had visions of becoming a millionaire. But when the installmant payments came due and Finkel discovered what his customers had done with the jewelry his vision turned out to have been a mirage. One after the other, his rings and bracelets had gone straight from the hands of his customers to the hands of the pawnbroker across the street from Astoria Hall. It was one way of raising a few dollars during the strike, while no wages were coming in.

When the strike was settled and the men went back to work, Finkel spent more time getting his merchandise out of the pawnshop than he did at work. . . .

CHAPTER 53

A Strike for a Union Book

IN THE EARLY YEARS of the clothing union, an uncle of mine came to me and asked me to do him a favor. It was really a small favor, but the complications and convolutions ensuing therefrom will illustrate one of the difficulties in those days.

Uncle wanted me to help a *landsman* of ours, a distant relative, get a membership card in the Amalgamated. When I spoke with the "greenhorn," whose name was Velvl, I discovered that he was a skilled craftsman and had been a member of the Tailors' Guild in the old country. I explained to him how the tailoring trade was "departmentalized" in America and how each craft was controlled by a separate local union.

Since he was on the stout side, he decided he would become a presser, because a presser can stand at his work and not be twisted up in a chair all day like a tailor or an operator. I tried to show him that bushelers, fitters, trimmers, and canvas-basters can also work standing up, but he stuck to his decision to become a presser, the main reason being, he confided, that his eyes were not too good.

I spoke to a leader of the pressers' local and one day my uncle took Velvl up to see the membership committee of that local. They put him through an interrogation.

"Why do you want to be a presser?"

Velvl, the greenhorn, explained frankly: "I'm a tailor

from the old country, but I want to be a presser because I can't sit at my work."

The interrogator advised him derisively: "If you don't want a sitting-down job, you can be a letter-carrier, a street-car conductor, a policeman, but why a presser? You're a tailor, so you belong in the tailors' local!"

In another room of the same building, the membership committee of the tailors' local put Velvl through the same ordeal.

"Who told you to become a tailor? How do you know you can do the work?"

Velvl answered patiently. "I was an experienced tailor in the old country. I can make a coat from beginning to end. My work was worn by noblemen, generals, lawyers. I can make the finest uniforms, trousers, vests, overcoats, anything you name. . . ."

"Take my advice," a committeeman interrupted him, "become a pants-maker. If there's no work in pants, you can always get a job in knee-pants. All the greenhorns begin in pants, you understand . . ." and he patted Velvel on the back like a big brother.

The following week, my uncle took Velvl to the office of the pants-makers' local. The pants-makers sent him to the vest-makers. The vestmakers sent him to the custom-tailors. At the custom-tailors, he was again put on the griddle.

"What do you really want?"

My uncle thought he would smooth the path for Velvl. "Please, all we want is a union-book for the greenhorn."

"At least you don't want a bankbook for him," the committeeman jibed.

After a series of questions, the committee decided that Velvl should become an operator. Velvl went through

the whole business again explaining why he couldn't sit at a machine. But the committee remained unconvinced.

For weeks he went from one job to another and my uncle resignedly gave up the idea of getting him into the union of his craft.

A few months later, the union declared a strike against several large manufacturers. We organized a committee to pull out their contractor shops. We went looking for their work in the smaller shops, which waited for opportunities like this to get business from the larger factories. One day we found out through a union cutter that work was being done in an open shop on Monroe Street. We succeeded in getting the workers at this shop to go out on strike and we brought them to a meeting in a hall on East Broadway.

As I stood speaking in front of the men, I thought I saw someone who looked like my *landsman* Velvl trying to hide behind a pole in the meeting room. When I finished speaking I went over to take a closer look. I had not been mistaken. "What are you doing here, Velvl? You were working in that scab shop? Were you, Velvl?"

With tears in his eyes he began to defend himself. "I only started this week. I went in to scab because I want to join the union, that's the real reason! At home I was a union-man for 17 years. When I was still an apprentice carrying out the garbage pails for the boss' wife, I was already a union-man. Now, when I'm a finished craftsman, they chase me from one local to another, they make fun of me because I'm a 'greenhorn'!"

What could I say? I tried lamely to explain the situation here, the craft set-up and its vexing problems. But Velvl kept hammering at the weak point in my defense.

"The unions tell us: 'Workers of all lands, unite!' But

when a worker comes to them week-in week-out and begs for work as a union man, please, give me a union book, I want to join the union—what do they do? They chase him from one committee to another—"

"But why did you have to scab? Don't you know what can happen to you in such a situation?"

"Sure I know. But I had to take the chance. If they won't let me into the union peacefully, I'll make them drag me in by force!"

Velvl was right. At the next shop meeting, the walking delegate announced that all those who were not yet members of the union *must* pay five dollars and ten cents initiation fee and *must* join the union. Velvl was accepted into the pressers' local. . . .

CHAPTER 54

A Short-Lived Savings-and-Loan Society

MR. GALICK HAD A SHOP on Water street. Mr. Galick was a man of ideas. One of his ideas was that the workers in his shop ought to have a savings-and-loan society, with benefits to help them, God forbid, in time of need. Gradually he brought some of the men around to his point of view. One day he called all his workers together and laid his proposal before them. Cohen, the trimmer, who was like the second blade in a scissors with Mr. Galick, got the message immediately and made a motion to adopt the plan. Some of the more enlightened workers argued that it certainly wouldn't hurt to have such a fund, but that the boss ought to have nothing to do with it. Mr. Galick thereupon announced that if they would set up such a fund he would contribute the first hundred dollars, just to get it started. This magnanimous gesture won the day and Cohen's original motion carried. Mr. Galick was voted a member of the society.

A committee was then elected to work out a constitution. The constitution, as finally adopted, provided that for a year's time the fund should be permitted to grow without withdrawals. The bookkeeper would deduct a dollar from everybody's pay each week and deposit it in the fund. After the year, the benefits would begin to flow in accordance with the regulations; for example: A worker forced to stay out of work because of illness would get 10 dollars a week for 4 weeks. When a worker got

married, the fund would provide a wedding present of 50 dollars. When a member's son or daughter got married, he would get a gift of 25 dollars. If a worker had to leave his job altogether because of sickness or old-age, he would get a retirement gift of 200 dollars.

The fund grew. Some of the more skeptical workers in the shop hinted that Mr. Galick was using the money for his own business. It's true, they said, that the committee sees the figures of the fund. But where do they see them? Only in the office records of the shop, not in a bankbook or in any other records over which the committee had any control. But most of the workers believed that everything was "all right" and they waited impatiently for the opportunity to make use of the fund.

Moishe Weintraub, an old presser, counted the days to his retirement. His rheumatic legs tormented him unremittingly, but he stood yoked to the pressing iron and told them stubbornly: "Just you wait, my good and faithful legs, just wait another few weeks. I'll get my 200 dollars and you'll get your vacation . . . you and me both."

Harry, the stitcher, had another sort of dream. Harry was only 26. He was one of the shop committee who had drawn up the constitution of the savings-and-loan society and he knew the rules well. Harry was planning to get married and he had put off the wedding until the year of investment would be up, so that he and his bride could get the 50 dollars wedding present.

During the year, another development of importance took place: Cohen, the trimmer, became a partner in the business.

One Thursday afternoon, without any advance notice, Mr. Cohen informed the workers that the shop would

stay closed until Monday and that they would all get their pay then. But Monday morning, when they came in to work, they found the shop as dead as a cemetery. Most of the machinery was gone. From a machinist who had come in to remove the last of the motors, they learned that Galick & Cohen had moved the shop to Perth Amboy.

So a committee traveled out to Perth Amboy to search for the shop and the savings-and-loan society's treasury. When they entered the street on which the shop was located, a policeman seemed to rise up out of the earth and block their way. The policeman was very solicitous. He insisted on seeing that they got back to New York safely and personally escorted them to the railroad station just to make sure.

A few days later, word reached them that the wedding of Harry, the stitcher, would take place in two weeks. The same informant told them that Harry was at Galick & Cohen's shop in Perth Amboy. By a little detective work, they found out that the wedding would be held in a synagogue on Read Street. Invited or no, a committee was elected to attend Harry's wedding. The head of the committee was Laybel "Sponge," a presser, with a pair of healthy fists.

On the happy day, they marched into the reception hall, mingled with the guests and had a couple of l'chayims with the relatives. Then they turned their attention to Mr. Cohen, who had been trying to make himself invisible behind the skirts of his corpulent wife. When they began to question him in a friendly way, as befits guests at a wedding, about the shop and its new location, about the Society and its funds, Cohen precipitately yelled "POLICE!" Before he could yell a second time, however, Laybel "Sponge" pulled Cohen's hat over

his ears and ripped a flap off the tuxedo which he had rented for the occasion. Then Laybel and the committee politely took their leave.

When the committee reported next day to the other workers, one wag commented bitterly: "We were supposed to have a celebration to open the savings-and-loan fund, instead we'd better arrange a funeral for our poor departed few bucks. . . ."

CHAPTER 55

A Shop in a Thimble

At Kosovsky & Friedzel's on Market Street, an operator once came on the job whose name was Fyvel Puzi (Fyvel Fatty). Apparently this was a nickname with which he had been crowned because he possessed, as the tailors observed, a pair of "old-country cheeks, plump and red as fresh apples."

This shop manufactured a line of inexpensive clothing. The earnings were pitiful. And Fyvel Puzi, who had, thank God, a good appetite, ate up all his pay. Among the other workers in the shop was a widow, Bertha, age about 40, and her daughter Bella, about 20. Bertha regarded her employment as temporary. She was waiting for a court decision on an accident in which her husband had been killed. The truck which had run him over had been insured and her lawyer had promised a tidy sum of money from the insurance company. Besides, she had three small children who needed her at home.

Fyvel Puzi was about 28 and he took a fancy to Bertha's daughter Bella. They went out together a few times and one evening Bertha invited him to come for dinner. She prepared a fine meal, and what with one thing and another, Fyvel realized that he was in love not with Bella, but with her mother, Bertha.

Bella, undaunted, found company more suitable to

her youth and became engaged to a young fellow of about 20.

Soon thereafter, Fyvel married Bertha and moved into her home. Bella followed suit and moved her husband in too. The unspoken understanding was that as soon as Bertha was awarded the insurance money, she would buy a big house and they would all live happily and comfortably together.

At the end of a year, both mother and daughter were blessed with additions to the already crowded household, and the only breadwinners now were Fyvel and his son-in-law, Bella's husband, Morris. Fyvel earned a few dollars in the shop and Morris even less, peddling notions near the Brooklyn Bridge.

But at last, when Bertha received the $5,000 from the insurance company, they found a suitable house—two stories and a basement—on Clymer Street in Brooklyn. At a family conference, they decided that the wisest thing to do was to rent out one floor, so as to make it easier to pay the mortgage. The other floor they would make do for the two families and in the basement they would open some kind of a little shop where they could work and bring in a few more dollars.

Fyvel began to buy up remnants ("remnitzas" was the East Side term) out of which they would make knee-pants, vests and cheap trousers. Fyvel Puzi would work on the garments when he came home from the shop and Bertha and the children, during the day, would "finish" them, sew on the buttons, etc. Then Morris would take the merchandise out on his pushcart to the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge.

The plan, however, was quickly disrupted. The house itself began to run into more money than they had anti-

cipated and living expenses ate up the rest. They were forced to modify the plan. So they rented out the other floor and both families moved into the basement.

But Fyvel Puzi was not one to give up an idea. He went out and rented a room in back of a store on Rivington Street. The store was a real-estate office. Fyvel paid 8 dollars a month for the room and told the owner he would use it as a storage-room for some goods and a few old machines.

The real-estate office would close every evening about 6, and Fyvel and Morris would come at half-past and sit down to work. They cut and prepared as many pieces as they could by eleven o'clock and then took them home to be finished. Some months passed and their routine was working well, but they had reckoned without the electric company's billing system. The man in the real-estate office, after a few months, noticed that his electric bills had taken a sudden leap upward; they had, in fact, tripled. Putting one and two together, the answer came from the back room. And since the 8 dollars a month was now a losing proposition, he confronted the culprits with the evidence one night, as they worked away, all lights burning and two machines running, and ordered them to vacate the premises forthwith.

Fyvel and Morris had no choice in the matter. The next morning, they came with Morris's pushcart and loaded their shop into it. But where to take it? There was nowhere else but the basement of Bertha's house. What was already crowded living-quarters for two families was thus transformed into a sweatshop that resembled a madhouse.

After a few weeks, some of Fyvel's neighbors, who were by this time union-men, conscious of the union's social

responsibility, reported to the Amalgamated that there was a scab shop on their street working far into the night. The union sent a committee one evening which found the entire family busily at work. Fyvel, who was really a good union-man, recognized some of the committee, and greeted them cordially. At first he was confused by their mission. Then slowly and reluctantly, he agreed that they were right, and he agreed to go out of business. There was one sweatshop less in New York.

CHAPTER 56

A Wedding in a "Bootleg Shop"

IN 1923, KLENETSKY'S contracting shop on Division Street was still a non-union shop. A few workers in this shop worked "steady," which meant day and night, Saturday and Sunday. But most of the workers at Klenetsky's were part-time workers with jobs in other shops. On week-ends, or when their regular jobs slacked off, they would slip into Klenetsky's to do a little "bootleg" work. And there were plenty of workers like these, either "hungry for the dollar," or simply in dire need of extra cash to make ends meet.

Among the steady workers at Klenetsky's was an operator, Sam Rutnik. Sam had brought his father, Sol, a presser, into the shop, too. Another "regular" was the boss's daughter Sadie. Her principal job was to sew the tickets on the garments, but she was the "expediter" and "trouble-shooter" in every operation in the shop. She could make a garment from start to finish. She was constantly running from one end of the shop to the other to fix something, press something, straighten this, adjust that. "Sadie! Sadie!" was the refrain in the shop all day long.

But her most frequent visits were at Sam Rutnick's machine. He was a genius at finding reasons to summon her. And Sadie didn't seem to mind this one bit. The other workers, not being blind, noticed in fact, that she

welcomed these opportunities to be of assistance to Sam. So it was no surprise to anyone when the news "leaked out" that Sam and Sadie had made plans to be married.

When the workers in the shop began seriously to consider organizing Klenetsky's shop, they did not include Sam Rutnick and his father in their plans. Many did not trust him and were cautious about what they said in his presence. Because of his relationship with Sadie, the boss's daughter, they felt they had grounds for suspicion. "It's OK to make a *l'chayim* with him, but not a union."

But these suspicions turned out to be completely unfounded and unjustified. Both Sam and his father were sincerely interested in organizing the shop. What's more, even Sadie, the boss's own daughter, secretly helped them in the work of organization.

Klenetsky himself when the union called its first stoppage at his shop, was left in no doubt whatever as to what side his future in-laws, and perhaps his own daughter, were on. One Friday morning, the day before the wedding, Sam was arrested on the picket line in front of the shop. Mr. Klenetsky, as bitter as he was when he discovered this, nevertheless hurried to the station-house to have Sam released. He did not want his son-in-law spending Saturday in the hoose-gow when he should be standing under the wedding-canopy.

At the wedding itself, the guests were drawn tighter than the strings on the fiddles. The opposing camps were sharply lined up and separated. The guests at one table were making maledictory toasts to the guests at another table. Klenetsky, tormented by the whole situation, tried to drown his vexation in whisky and finally was so successful that he toasted his son-in-law: "Long live the union!"

Under the canopy, the two opposing sides stared coldly at each other, as though it were an encounter on a picket line. The rabbi went through with the ceremony, the musicians burst into a *freylichs* (a lively dance tune), and Klenetsky, who was drunk, threw his arms around Sol Rutnick, the groom's father, and insisted on kissing him. But Sol whispered something into his ear and Klenetsky stepped back, raised his hand and brought it down thumpingly on Sol's top-hat.

When Sam saw this, he leaped to his father's defense and shoved Klenetsky across the room. The bride entered the fray as a peacemaker and had her veil ripped off for her pains.

As the festivities came to a disastrous end, Klenetsky announced that he was hereby disowning his daughter, and that certainly he did not want the bride and groom to come to live in his house as had been previously arranged.

The strike at the shop continued even more fiercely. The two families were more estranged than ever. But at the height of the feud, the strike was settled. And with the settlement came domestic peace. The business-agent, a diplomat, proposed a belated wedding-party in the shop to celebrate the marriage and the settlement simultaneously. The first toast was offered to the new shop chairman, the boss's in-law and the groom's father, Sol Rutnick.

CHAPTER 57

Izzy Galant and his Piece-Work

IZZY GALANT, an operator, worked for the contractor Wishnevsky on Christie Street. All the workers in this shop were on week-work but Galant had "formed his own union" and signed an agreement with the boss, who was his "bosom companion," to work piece-work.

There was a reason for Izzy Galant's ardent championing of the piece-work system. Both he and the boss, Wishnevsky, were fanatical cardplayers. The shop was on the third floor. On the first floor of the same building, there was a restaurant where they could eat frankfurters, drink wine and—this was the main thing—get up a game. When the game was for high stakes, Wishnevsky would leave the shop in charge of the foreman and run down to take a hand. When pikers were playing penny-ante, however, it was Izzy Galant who ran downstairs to "read a few psalms," as the players used to call their sport.

No matter how late Galant would get to bed at night, he was in the shop and at his machine long before everyone else. Before the shop chairman blew his whistle, Izzy Galant had put in a couple of hours' work, so that the pieces would be ready for the other workers, and so that, if necessary, he could "drop down to a game."

As a result, he was always sleepy. One morning, his fellow-workers heard peculiar sounds coming out of his lunch box. Either a tiny operator was running a minia-

ture machine in there, as one wag conjectured, or, as was most likely, a mouse had got into the lunch box. Since the latter would not have been at all surprising, Izzy took his lunch box over to a window and very gingerly opened it. No mouse leaped out, but an ancient alarm-clock lay there busily ticking away. A wave of laughter went through the shop. Izzy Galant had sleepily put the clock into his lunch box instead of the food which his wife had prepared. . . .

Mrs. Galant, however, was destined to perform a much more important service for her husband than preparing his lunch. One Monday night a woman appeared at a meeting of the Executive Board of the operator's local and asked to be heard on a serious charge. The members of the board, unaccustomed to this sort of request, were puzzled as to what the nature of her complaint would be and gave her the floor.

"What do you want of my young life?" she began weepingly. "What do you want of my husband? He's the father of four children—why does the union keep him away from his family? And why does he have to spend so much money on your union that he has none left for us?"

The Executive Board was now more puzzled than ever. Some of them began to fear they were dealing with a deranged mind. The chairman finally asked Charles Englander, one of the board members, to take the woman out into the hall and try to get her to talk more rationally. Maybe he could discover what was at the bottom of her hysteria. The two of them went out into the corridor and the woman became a little quieter but continued her plaint:

"Why does the union need my husband day and night? Why does the union take my husband's money when

he doesn't even have enough for his children's shoes? Is that what unions are for?"

"Who is your husband?" asked Englander.

"Stop tormenting me! You know as well as I do who my husband is! Who doesn't know Izzy Galant? He gives so much of his life to the union!"

"Oh! Izzy Galant" Englander laughed. "Certainly we all know him! Come tomorrow night, around nine o'clock, to one of our meetings at 98 Forsythe Street and I'll show you what your husband does for the union, and why it costs him so much money. . . ."

The next evening, she met Englander at the hall on Forsythe Street. He took her to the restaurant on Christie Street and asked her to take a good look, through the window, toward the back of the room. "See? That's your husband, yes? There's his union, there's where he spends his time, and that's where all his money goes!"

Mrs. Galant marched into the restaurant and toward the card game at the back. Startled, Izzy exclaimed lamely: "What are *you* doing here?"

"I came to help you with your union work!" his wife retorted angrily, and turned the table, money, cards and all, upside down.

The next day, Izzy Galant negotiated a new agreement with Wishnevsky and went back on week-work. And the card games in the restaurant continued without him.

CHAPTER 58

A Fight for Women's Rights

AT SIDLER & GLAZER'S shop on Lewis Street, there was no union and nothing even remotely approaching union conditions. The shop was known as a *Moshev Z'kaynim*—an Old Folks Home. Tailors would go there reluctantly to do a day's work; to take a steady job there was out of the question.

The truth was that in this *"Moshev Z'kaynim,"* the workers used to compete with each other, and as a result, always worked beyond their normal capacity. The bundles of work seemed to "burn up" beneath their hands.

A woman could not get a job as a finisher at Sidler & Glazer's. Among the operators and pressers, a young person, male or female, was anathema. The old finisher, Melech Fleisher, had one argument and nothing could shake him from it: "With me the shop is like my synagogue. I don't sit together with women!" (In synagogues, there is a separate section for women, apart from the men.)

But it happened that the brother-in-law of Ike Bogush, another finisher died, and Ike wanted to get a job for the widow, his sister. The woman knew her job well. She had worked for years in various shops as a finisher. Ike Bogush had a long discussion with Mr. Glazer and the latter agreed to let Ike's sister come up to work.

But here a struggle developed. The first morning that

she showed up for work and approached the finishers' table, all the men, as at a signal, took off their aprons and prepared to leave the shop. Ike Bogush was now in a dilemma. Should he walk out with the other finishers or stay and work with his sister?

Mr. Sidler came running over to find out the reason for the "uprising." Ike Bogush explained that if his sister did not go to work, he would have to support her, and he wasn't even earning enough for his own wife and children. Melech Fleisher, however, insisted that he would never, never work at the same table with a woman. She was a widow? Then let her find another husband. The debate went back and forth until the operator Rose, whose word carried weight with the other men, proposed that she be allowed to work in the shop, but at another table, and that her weekly pay be three dollars less than that of the men. The proposal was accepted by all the parties.

When things got slack in the shop, Sidler & Glazer made good use of this "wage differential." The widow was given whatever little work there was to do and Mr. Glazer would say with self-righteous piety: "It's a *mitsva* to give a widow the opportunity to earn her own living."

It was not till then that many of the finishers realized that they themselves had woven the rope that was tightening around their necks, and demanded that women should receive the same pay as the men.

At about this time, too, a dispute broke out among the pressers. Gutmark, the presser, had brought in his son to learn the trade. The pressers were opposed to bringing in a learner. This was not a school, they agreed, and furthermore, if Gutmark's son wanted to learn a good trade, let him become a prizefighter, he was big enough. But Gutmark, who was over 70, was himself a

handy man with his fists, and the others were a little bit afraid of him. So his son Irving came up to learn the trade of pressing.

After he had worked there a few weeks he began to see what kind of sweatshop he was in and he didn't like it. He went to the union office and asked that they send out a committee to organize the shop. When Irving told his father that he was going to ask for a raise, Gutmark began to yell at him: "Already? You haven't even worked a month and you want a raise? You're out of your mind? You should thank God you finally learned a good trade and the boss is giving you a job.

Irving tried to enlighten his father. "If he keeps *me* on, then sooner or later he'll let *you* go, because it pays him better to have a young slave than an old one."

This so enraged the old Gutmark that he ran over to Sidler and demanded that Irving be sacked at once. "Already this schneck is going to ask you for a raise! I tell you, if you don't sack him, I'll quit!"

Glazer, the other boss, who was listening to this conversation, broke in angrily: "Since when are *you* running the shop? If you want to quit, go ahead, nobody's stopping you!"

For a moment, the old man was dumbstruck. Then he took off his apron, grabbed his coat and ran out of the shop. His son said nothing and went on with his work, but the look on his face grew more and more concerned. Finally, he told the other pressers that he was going out to find his father.

Instead, however, he went straight to the union office and advised the committee that the moment had come to act. He returned with a walking-delegate who came into the shop and instructed the workers at each table to come

to Columbia Hall that evening for a shop meeting. "Whoever does not come will not be allowed to work!" he announced gravely. One of the pressers was then dispatched to find the elder Gutmark and deliver the same instructions.

At the shop meeting in Columbia Hall, Irving took the floor and spoke so eloquently that all the workers sat agape. The old Gutmark listened intently as tears rolled down his cheeks. Irving spoke directly to his father.

"At home you're my father and I'm your son and I will obey you. But in the shop, we are equal union brothers. And if the bosses begin to feel that in the shop we are all equal, young and old, men and women, Negro and white, they will not be able to use one against the other!"

Irving Gutmark was elected shop chairman at the meeting. Glazer & Sidler didn't like the idea very much, but they had no choice in the matter.

At the second shop meeting the old Gutmark asked the chairman for the floor thusly: "Brother Chairman, God bless you, *zuneleh*!"

CHAPTER 59

An "Aristocratic" Company

IN 1924, A GENERAL strike was called in the men's clothing industry in New York. The strike was so effective that it swept a number of non-union shops in its wake, notorious open-shops and scab-nests which nobody expected would ever be organized.

The firm of Berger Raphael & Weill was looked upon by the tailors as an "aristocratic" company, its "aristocracy" consisting essentially in the fact that it was a non-union shop. This shop was located in the very heart of the then needle-trade market at University Place and 11th Street.

The workers at Berger, Raphael & Weil struck. But despite the fact that this shop was only one of hundreds that went out, the strike there was more prominent than at any of the others. This was so primarily because the company stopped at nothing in its fight against the union. The company felt especially aggrieved, and personally affronted, because almost every one of its employees had responded to the very first strike call.

In the beginning, the owners were so taken aback that they did nothing. But in a few days they "regrouped their forces" and set out to break the strike. Their methods were hardly "aristocratic," but they were tried and true: They hired a gang of plug-uglies and with the aid of the police, brought a number of scabs into the shop.

Every day, fights flared up outside the shop. This attracted hundreds of striking tailors from all over the city who came to help in the picketing. One day the police arrested a large number of strikers, including some who had been hurt in the scuffle. They herded us into the paddy-wagons and drove us to the jailhouse, where they packed us like sardines into box-like cells that were hardly built to handle the sudden influx.

In these uncomfortable circumstances, some of the men became worried and dejected; some of them were in pain, and I felt that something had to be done to raise their morale. Necessity being the mother of invention, I invented a Yiddish song to the tune of an old Russian song which most of the workers knew. The sense of the words was as follows:

> The hour has struck to answer the call:
> Workers arise!
> Fall in line! We'll free ourselves of slavery!
> Strike! Strike! Strike!
> New strength to the fight!
> Machines will be idle, factories deserted—
> No union, no contract, no work!
> All have learned and know the score—
> A scab is a louse, an ugly sore!
> No gangsters can scare us, no clubs of police.
> We'll answer them all on the picket line!
> They have the millions of dollars, it's true,
> But their money will do them no good—
> Brothers, we have the hands!

We started the song in our cell. Immediately it was picked up by the men in the other cells. Things grew lively.

The police captain couldn't stand it. "Cut that out! Cut

that out!" he began to scream.

"If you don't like our singing, throw us out!" we replied.

Later that day we were all released, but I doubt that our singing had anything to do with it. . . .

A few days later one of the thugs attacked a picket and struck him on the head with a blackjack. When I saw the man fall to the ground, blood gushing out of his head, I ran over to try to stanch the flow. But my handkerchief was almost useless. The sight of his open skull unnerved me. The blood had completely covered his face. Fortunately, an ambulance had been called for another casualty and the doctor lost no time in stopping the bleeding. When he had cleaned some of the blood away, and I got a good look at the picket's face, a chill passed through me at how narrowly he had escaped death. But this was nothing to the feeling of horror that swept the picket line a few moments later. Someone had recognized the attacker —it was the victim's own son.

As the ambulance clanged away, the strikers began to compare notes, to reconstruct what had happened. The striker was an operator at Berger, Raphael & Weil. His son was one of the strong-arm men brought in to break the strike. He had been fighting with one of the strikers and the father had tried to separate them.

Weeks later, after the strike had been settled and Berger, Raphael & Weil had signed with the union, I went up to visit the man in his home in the Bronx. Here I at last got a full picture of the tragedy that had taken place on the picket line. His head still swathed in bandages, the father told me how his son had come to be a strong-arm guy.

"When my son was 19 years old, he decided to quit school. The truth was, we needed him at home, too,

things were pretty bad, and I offered to take him up to the shop and teach him a trade. But his mother," and he nodded in the direction of his wife, who was seated nearby, "she would have none of it. She didn't want her son to become a tailor like his father. You know how these things are. But I took him into the shop anyway, in the shipping department. We told her he was learning to be a shipping-clerk, and for a little while the title fooled her."

He smiled wanly at his wife. "It was the word 'clerk' that did it. She knew that people who worked in banks, or in the post-office, were called clerks, so a shipping-clerk could hardly be in the tailoring line. But later when she started asking around, and one of the neighbors described the duties of a shipping-clerk in a clothing factory, she put her foot down again and convinced my son to give up the job. For weeks and weeks, he roamed the streets without a penny in his pockets!"

His wife leaned forward in her chair as if to defend herself, but she closed her eyes and said nothing.

"When the strike was called at our shop," her husband continued, "the company sent out letters to everybody who had ever worked there and offered them jobs at good pay. My son got one of those letters, but he never showed it to me, and didn't say a word about it. He really thought he was getting a good job. But when he came up to work, the very first day, the foreman told him there was no work in the shop but that he would get good money just for standing outside the building and guarding the entrance. A snap job, my son thought, doing nothing and getting paid for it. But the strong-arm gang saw a likely recruit in him for their 'department.' They began to draw him into their 'games.' That's how it started. And you saw how it ended. . . ."

A. I. SHIPLACOFF, GEN'L MGR.

TELEPHONES: (6332, 6334, 0054, 5959, 4959) SPRING

PETER MONAT, SEC'Y-TREAS.

NEW YORK JOINT BOARD

OF THE

AMALGAMATED CLOTHING WORKERS OF AMERICA

MAIN OFFICE, 611-621 BROADWAY

(CABLE BUILDING)

NEW YORK

February 10th, 1921

Mr. S. Liptzin,
688 Rockaway Ave.,
B'Klyn.

Dear Sir and Brother:

I feel that it is really unnecessary to tell you of the serious situation in our industry at the present time.

To keep up the morale of our workers, it is necessary to impress them with the importance of absolute solidarity and continued courage in the fight which is to end in victory. Most of our members are Jewish, with which fact you are no doubt familiar, and it is very important that we have Jewish speakers to address them at their mass meetings. I think that we have written to you before on this point, but the letter may have failed to reach you.

I hope very much that you will designate a definite period in which you could do this very important and vital work. The morning is the part of the day in which the mass meetings are held and it would be desirable that you speak then.

It is the speakers who are keeping the morale of the workers up and it is they who are keeping strong the backbone of the members to fight to a victorious conclusion.

I hope very much that we may count on you in the present crisis and that you will answer promptly, using the enclosed stamped envelope for reply.

Yours for victory soon,

David J. Saposs
Educational Director.

BS&AU
12646

First they asked me to speak, in order to keep up the morale of the workers, then they suspended me, because we were fighting for the morale of the union.

CHAPTER 60

Something To Sing About

SOME YEARS AGO, the town of Rahway, New Jersey, became a city of refuge for scab shops in the men's clothing industry. When the Amalgamated announced that it was starting a campaign to organize the out-of-town shops, the scab-employers of Rahway determined to shut the city-gates to the union. The local Chamber of Commerce assigned itself the job of organizing the scabbing. The preachers in all the churches held forth against the evils of unionism. The rabbis in the synagogues also found it necessary to warn against the union.

The main line of propaganda was that the "union from New York" wanted to take the bread out of the mouths of Rahway's workers; that the union, instead of organizing the shops, would close them down and leave the workers stranded. The propaganda took effect. A sizeable section of Rahway's workers began to organize to "protect themselves against the union."

It was enough for someone to point at a passer-by and say that "he cames from New York;" there would soon be a crowd around him and a policeman would conduct him straightway to the railroad station with instructions to "get out of town."

Now it happened that the Jews of Rahway had arranged for a cantor to come in from New York for Friday evening and Sabbath services. Friday afternoon the cantor arrived. He had no sooner stepped off the train when

someone pointed him out to the policeman as a "New York scab," sent by the Amalgamated to talk the workers of Rahway out of their jobs.

The cantor's explanations were of no avail. The Irish policeman didn't even understand him; he simply held onto his arm in a tight grip until the next train to New York arrived. At the very last minute, a contractor about to board the train recognized the cantor; he had often heard him lead services in Brownsville.

So the tables were turned, and the cantor had a police escort all the way to the synagogue.

CHAPTER 61

Petty Rackets

AT A TIME WHEN the rank-and-file tailors were carrying on a struggle against "Standards of Production" (a fancy name for speed-up), some of the union leaders were waging their own "struggle" to provide for a "rainy day" for themselves. A number of business-agents, clerks, and even some managers, began to prepare cozy spots for themselves among the employers – points of operation – from which they could either become bosses themselves, or partners, or owners of some kind of business related to the garment trade; it had to be an activity which would keep them in constant touch with the union. Thus, certain businesses became very popular among some of the leaders: trimming supplies, sewing machines, pressing equipment, sponging material, insurance, printing, etc.

As a result of this competition among the ex-union-leaders and those who still had one foot in the union, various other businesses became a source of graft and corruption. Thus, for instance, there was a popular haberdashery on Delancey Street, run by a former union leader, in which the fate of various manufacturers was decided; which ones would grow and prosper and which ones would lose their shirts.

If one contractor asked another how he happened to get the work of such-and-such a manufacturer, the answer might be: "I went and bought an expensive necktie!"

This meant that he had gone to this haberdashery on Delancey Street and handed over a stipulated sum of money in order to obtain the work of such-and-such a manufacturer. So the contractor who complained that he had once bought a shirt on which every button cost him a hundred dollars was not exaggerating.

Some of the business agents had worked out a system which enabled them "to swear by all that's holy" that they did not take graft. It was true. They did not take it; they found it. . . . A business agent would come into the shop in the morning and hang his coat up in the office. Was it his fault that when he put on his coat when leaving he found a packet of bills in his pocket? Under such conditions, a number of honest officials were ashamed to stay in office, and resigned.

A really original and ingenious scheme was worked out by a former manager of the Knee Pants Union. He had once been employed around the Yiddish theater and he made good use of his experience. This was his method: He would get possession of a batch of unused theater tickets, usually about a year old. He would bring a pack of these tickets to an employer and "sell" it to him for a hundred dollars, or fifty, or twenty-five, depending on how large a favor he had done.

Once it happened that a contractor decided to play a practical joke on one of his operators. He had a couple of theater-tickets which he could not use, he told the operator, and he would gladly give them to him. The operator was overjoyed at this treat and accepted the tickets. Subsequently, he realized that he would not be able to go to the theater on that particular night, but not wanting to waste the tickets, he presented them to the business agent of his local.

The business agent then made a date with his "lady-friend" and they went to the theater. Of course, when he presented the tickets to the doorman, he was turned away brusquely for trying to palm off a couple of last year's tickets. But the business agent was not a man to let a thing like this drop without getting to the bottom of it. By questioning the doorman and other people around the theater, he was able to track down the source of the tickets.

And that was the end of one grafter's neat little scheme of making money from both sides.

CHAPTER 62

Orgy in a Scab Shop

IT WAS THE third week of the general strike which the Amalgamated had called in New York. A number of firms had settled, others were negotiating with the union, but thousands of tailors were still out. The struggle was now concentrated around a few large firms which resisted bitterly and refused to recognize the union under any circumstances.

Several of these stubborn companies decided to move out of New York and open shop. A few weeks later we discovered that a large shop had been opened not far from Philadelphia and had arranged with a New York scab agency to provide workers and strongarm men to "protect" the shop. In Philadelphia itself, the company had scoured the city for scabs, down-and-outers, pimps, prostitutes and similar characters and given them "jobs" in the shop.

As soon as the union found out about this shop we made efforts to get people inside, both through the scab agency and through applying directly to the foreman, DeLatchey. This DeLatchey, we discovered, was himself a first-class hoodlum who would stop at nothing to break a strike. In the same building with the shop, he had set up one floor as a hotel and restaurant, where the scabs ate and slept. This was a very effective method of preventing any leaks to the outside. It was thus extremely difficult to get any information from the "scabs" planted

in the shop by the union. Once a worker did get out, it was impossible for him to get back in.

But with all that, DeLatchey had very little success in producing the work. With no plausible explanation (or so it seemed), colors were mixed up, sizes were confused, labels were interchanged. DeLatchey, however, didn't raise too much fuss. First, of course, he knew very well that the element he now had working in his shop were not really needle-trades workers, and in most cases had not had any kind of job in a long time. Secondly, he did not want the union to find out that things were not going smoothly.

One morning, the head operator seemed to be having trouble deciphering a number on a garment. DeLatchey noticed this and for some reason, became suspicious of him. He tiptoed quietly up behind the operator as he sat studying the label and without warning, hit him over the head with a pressing-board. A row started. Excitement spread through the shop. The special policeman, whose job it was to prevent just this kind of embroilment, whisked the operator into one of the rooms in the "hotel," called a doctor, and tried to iron everything out.

In the shop, the machines stopped. The "morale" was not very high to begin with, and an incident such as this was a good pretext to "knock off." The professional scabs were ready with their decks of cards. A bottle of liquor appeared from somewhere, the cards were shuffled and dealt, and the scabs were prepared to sit around and wait as long as necessary for another operator to be hired.

In the evening, after working hours, DeLatchey had provided entertainment for his crew. There were a number of mandolin players who accompanied the sing-

ing and dancing of the prostitutes. Every night there was a "smoker."

On this particular evening, one of these orgies was going full blast. The mandolins played; the whisky flowed freely; the prostitutes plied their trade – which was the main function for which they had been hired in the first place – to entertain the scabs and help them pass the time. During these proceedings, one of the prostitutes, known as Margo, got good and drunk and let herself go in a dance of wild abandon. The company of scabs applauded and encouraged her. At one point, the door opened and DeLatchey entered with a new batch of scabs he had found somewhere.

"Come in and join the fun, boys! You're just in time!"

The group came into the room and took seats. Margo went on with her dance. A minute or two later, one of the new arrivals began to fidget uneasily. He asked someone a question, received an answer, asked another question, and then cried out almost hysterically:

"Margo! Margo!"

Before anyone could stop him he had snatched a bottle off the table and hurled it at the woman. It hit her violently on the shoulder and she fell to the floor.

In a moment, he was surrounded by the special police and pummeled unmercifully. But through it all, he did not stop weeping and crying "Margo! Margo!"

It was DeLatchey, striving to control the incident, who called off the "specials" and tried to get the man quiet. It was urgent for him to find out where this man had come from, what was at the bottom of this outburst, whether it really was an outburst or a well-laid plan to cause trouble.

"Well, buddy," he said, "tell us what's eating you and

we might forget all about this. Do you know this Margo?"

"Do I know her!" the man replied sobbingly. "She's my wife! We're from Scranton. I'm a miner. Got sick and couldn't work any more. Six months now I'm out. She moved our two kids to her mother's and she said she was going to Philadelphia to look for work. She wrote me she had a job in a restaurant. A restaurant!" He made a sudden movement and the thugs turned to protect Margo, but he had other ideas. In one motion, he picked up a whisky bottle and threw it across the room toward a window. With a loud crash it went hurtling through the window and out into the street. Before they could subdue him, another bottle had followed the first.

By that time the damage was done. The nature of the "shop" could no longer be hushed up. The orgies were finished. The scabs and prostitutes spent that night in the police station. Among them was one union man, an operator, who later turned some of the scabs into good union members, but who never forgot the bizarre goings-on he had witnessed at that strange combination of shop, restaurant and disorderly house.

CHAPTER 63

The End of a Bureaucrat and a Fighter

A STRANGE AND BITTER character was Benny R., an active union man among the tailors. I got to know him well, and found him to be an honest man, in the days when we worked together at Witty Brothers. He had played a role in the founding of the Amalgamated in 1914. He called himself a progressive, but he was more a "kicker" than a progressive. His volatile nature constantly brought him into conflict with the leaders of the movement as well as with the workers in the shop.

Despite the fact that he was a well-read, cultured man, he treated his co-workers in the shop worse than the most unfeeling boor. Every day he had arguments and fights with the workers. He was afflicted with a stammer, especially when he was angry, but for his slowness with words he substituted the speed of his fists.

To go into a restaurant with Benny R. was to take your life into your hands. The waiters shuddered whenever he entered. If he wasn't pleased with the food that was served him, he would raise the roof. Once he beat up a whole group of union leaders sitting in a resturant because one of them had dared to pick up the larger drumstick which, he said, "he had had his eye on."

Benny was sent out to the coast to organize for the Amalgamated. It did not take long and he "fought" his way up to become the manager of the union in San Francisco.

The small employers in that city had managed to

institute a reign of terror against the workers, and Benny R., instead of coming to the help of the men, as they had rightfully expected, became a weapon against them. He may have been slow in speech when it came to defending the interests of the men, but he quickly became the mouthpiece of the employers against real union conditions. He set up a strong Employers' Association in San Francisco and this gave him ample opportunity to lord it over the workers in the shop.

Thus, Benny R., who got his education in the founding days of the Amalgamated, fought against the bureaucrats and gangsters, himself began to use the same methods until he himself fell victim to his own terror.

The tragedy happened this way. In one of the shops, a particularly bad sweatshop, the workers rebelled and called a strike. The bosses saw immediately that the men were in dead earnest, so they proposed to the strike committee that they get together and negotiate. The business manager, Benny R., however, was opposed to holding any negotiations until the workers went back to work like submissive sheep.

At a shop meeting, his "ukase" was rejected by the men. Benny at once began to reorganize the shop with scabs sent in by him. By this method he broke the strike and put a number of the workers on the blacklist — his and the employers'. He especially had it in for a worker who had once been his friend in the old days. This man was a good worker, dedicated to the cause of the workingmen, who had fought bitterly against his betrayal. Benny threw him out of the shop and kept him from getting another job in the trade, and even outside the trade.

One morning, he hid in Benny's office, and when he came in, began to plead with him almost on bended knee to stop terrorizing the group of men whom he had

thrown out of work. Benny, not even listening, fell back on his old methods and began to swing his fists. The man then pulled out a revolver and with one shot put an end to the bureaucrat Benny R.

The affair caused a sensation in the trade union movement. The progressives deplored this incident, pointing out to the workers that this was no way to clean corruption and terror out of the unions; that shooting a bureaucrat was not the way to change a situation where union bureaucrats worked hand in hand with the bosses.

The last act of this tragedy was even more bizarre. The man who had killed Benny R. fled, moving in lonely isolation from one hideout to another, filled with pain and regrets that he had killed a man who had once been his friend. The days and nights dragged interminably for him. His friends tried to convince him they would do everything possible to help him. But he stayed hidden in his dark rooms and warned them that he would do anything to avoid falling into the hands of the police. He was not concerned so much for himself as for the harm that would accrue to the union when the affair became public.

Alone in his rooms for days on end, every sound alarmed and frightened him. Was it the enemy catching up with him?

Finally, one quiet, early morning, as he lay half-asleep on his bed, he began to sense that someone was outside his door. A moment later he heard a cautious scratching at his window. He began to tremble. This was the moment he had dreaded all along. He reached for the revolver under his pillow. Without even stopping to see who had found him, he put a bullet in his own brain.

The man outside his window was a friend, who had come to move him to another city.

CHAPTER 64

Two Fingers and a "Fig"

THE 1922 LOCKOUT and strike of the tailors assumed the appearance of an all-out effort by the employers to destroy the union. The police were extremely brutal in the attacks on the strikers.

At a big shop near Broadway and Fourth Street, there were daily outbreaks of violence instigated by the hired gangsters of the employers. One Monday morning, as the police were bringing in a group of scabs, a fight broke out near the entrance to the factory. One policeman split the head of an Italian worker named Tosca. Tosca's wife, who was also on the picket line, began to pull at the policeman's coat and ripped away a sleeve. Another policeman came running up and clubbed Mrs. Tosca. Then he arrested her for resisting an officer.

In court the next day, the woman was fined 50 dollars and ten days in jail. "Crazy justice!" she screamed. "The cop he breaks my husband's head, that's nothing – but I tear the cop's sleeve, they put me in jail!" To illustrate the collusion between the cops and the judge, she held up her hand with two fingers close together and inserted her thumb between them. The judge, who interpreted this as a "fig" (a sign of contempt), banged his gavel and added another day to her sentence.

Another "humorous" case in that strike was the following:

On Houston Street, at Frankel's Shop, a finisher named

Rebecca Gutstein was excused by the strike committee from picket duty so she could look for another job. Mrs. Gutstein, in addition to her work in the shop, had also helped out in the office. She had had permission from the union to do this extra work because of her dire need, her husband then being a tubercular patient at a sanatorium. During the strike, she quickly obtained a job as a counter-girl in a cafeteria.

One morning, Mr. Frankel, her boss, came into the cafeteria for breakfast. When he saw Rebecca behind the counter, he started an argument with her and then brutally tossed the coffee in his cup in her face. She was badly burned and began to scream. The manager of the cafeteria applied first aid. A number of diners surrounded Mr. Frankel and called a policeman.

The policeman, however, greeted Mr. Frankel like a long-lost brother, and the upshot was that instead of arresting him, he said something quietly to the manager of the cafeteria and Rebecca was fired. With bandages on her face, she rejoined the picket line at Frankel's shop.

When the strike was settled and the strike committee met with Mr. Frankel, one of the demands was that Rebecca's wages be increased to cover her work in the office, but that she should no longer be required to do both jobs. He was also instructed to pay her for the two weeks' work she lost in the cafeteria and for the medical treatment necessitated by the burns on her face. Frankel had no choice but to agree.

CHAPTER 65

I Am Almost Kidnapped In Chicago

IN CHICAGO, TOO, as in all the other clothing centers, the garment workers protested against the lawlessness which had invaded the progressive ACW. There, too, gangsters, grafters and racketeers ruled the roost. Six rank-and-file leaders were expelled and many others beaten up.

One day, the progressive workers in Chicago invited me to come to Temple Hall to address a mass meeting. When I arrived in Chicago, I discovered that Beckerman had also been "invited" to the city . . . to break up the meeting.

That evening at Temple Hall, the manager of the building greeted us with the news that he had received a telephone call from a gangster threatening to destroy every piece of furniture and every window on the premises, if the meeting went through as scheduled. He could, therefore, not allow us to hold the meeting, the manager informed us nervously, unless we first gave him a deposit of 5,000 dollars to cover possible damages.

The committee argued with him but could not dissuade him. There was nothing left to do but find another place — and the meeting was due to begin in an hour! Somehow the committee found and rented another hall, and it was soon filling up with garment workers. But Beckerman & Company had also hired a hall and organized a rival meeting. With the help of the business

agents and the police they succeeded in diverting many of the workers to their meeting.

When I finished speaking I was told that Hyman Schneid was waiting for me backstage with an important message. H. Schneid, one of the leaders of the Amalgamated, was on the side of the progressives and we knew his sentiments. Backstage, Schneid gave me this cheery bit of news: A couple of Chicago gangsters had been hired to kidnap me, truss me up in a sack, and throw me into Lake Michigan. As a matter of fact, he added, they were waiting for me outside my hotel. What were we to do?

His wife, who was with him, proposed that before we made any other plans, we get away from this neighborhood immediately and go to their home in another part of the city. This we did. There we considered the situation further and decided that I was to stay on in Chicago for a few days more.

That same night a leaflet was prepared calling upon the garment workers to come to another meeting which was organized for three days later. For the next couple of days, the gangsters scoured the Chicago hotels looking for me, but I was safely ensconced at Schneid's home.

After the second meeting, I was driven to a small town nearby, whence I took the train back to New York.

It is only thanks to Hyman Schneid and his wife that I can sit here now and write about that excursion to Chicago. Were it not for them, I would have been at the bottom of Lake Michigan . . . in a sack.

CHAPTER 66

A New Job — Looking— For A Job

THE RACKETEERS in the unions, together with the bosses, set up a blacklist to keep the progressive workers out of the shops. When I applied at the union office for permission to work in the trade—after so many years of working at the machine and building the union— Mr. Hollander replied that as long as *he* was in office, I would never get a job in the trade. And since he was so well-connected with the employers, it was of course very easy for him to carry out his threat.

One day a tailor told me he had found a job for me in a shop in Passaic. It was a so-called union-shop controlled by a business agent of the "gang" which brought the already-cut goods from New York. Morris Needle, the tailor who told me about the job, explained that I would not have to show a union book. The custom in that shop was that the boss paid a dollar per capita to the business agent every week and thereby settled the dues payments for all the workers in his own office. The only thing I would have to do was use a fictitious name and be careful not to talk to anybody in the shop.

The next morning I came to work as Louis Samuels and was assigned a machine. I worked there for about two weeks this way. One day when I returned to the shop a few minutes before the end of the lunch period, the pressers were standing around the shop talking. As I walked

over to my machine and took off my coat one of the pressers called out to me:

"Hello, Mr. Liptzin! You're working here in this shop? Good!"

I didn't turn around, but I heard Morris Needle say: "Who's Liptzin? You must be mistaken. That man's name is Samuels!"

The presser burst out laughing. "Listen to him! He's telling me who that is! I know Liptzin from Goldman's place in New York!"

In the meantime the whistle blew and everybody went back to work.

The presser, apparently, had no intention of doing me any harm. On the contrary, he was glad to see me working in that shop. But his "discovery" was immediately communicated to the "front office." That evening the boss brought me my pay envelope.

"There's no more work here for you. . ." he said quietly.

The pay envelope was made out to "Sam Liptzin."

For a Bright Tomorrow

With every passing day it becomes clearer to the working people that whenever they raise their "strong hand" they improve their conditions; when they lower it, they strengthen the power of the employer, of the landlord, of the politician, of reaction. The ruling class has bought up a number of leaders, provocateurs, informers, jobholders; they may be union presidents, business managers, or just petty grafters and racketeers. They are the lawyers for the boss, and they are a menace to the workingman's job and to his freedom. The worker has only curses and contempt for these betrayers and for *those*

leaders who did not pass the test and sold their souls to the bosses. Every honest worker knows that the bread these men eat is dipped in the blood of exploitation. . . .

This will bring freedom to the working people of all nations. Atomic power, solar energy, all scientific knowledge, will be used by humanity to help liberate itself from wars, from exploitation, from anti-Semitism, from racism. Four hours a day will be enough to provide humanity with all its needs. Man will then be able to live a life of real freedom.

The day will come when working people, black and white, young and old, will happily tell the Tales of a Tailor of the "bad old days" when people lived in slums and slaved in sweatshops.

But that day will not come of itself. Man's hands must set the clock of time, wind it, and fix the alarm, so that it will properly sound the signal which will rouse humanity to the rising sun of our bright tomorrow!