

## The Greenhorn

“Why do you stand there like a wooden pole and don’t say a word? You want the job, okay; if not, get lost. There’s plenty of others to take your place.”

This is how the foreman speaks to Barukh, all the while dialing a telephone number.

Barukh, a slender young man with a bent back who wears a pair of glasses with cheap frames, blinks at the foreman as if straining to see him better. Finally he answers: “Yes, I will take it.”

The foreman does not hear. He is busy speaking into the phone. His English sounds like Polish Yiddish, but the words are incomprehensible. Finally he finishes the conversation, hurriedly replaces the receiver, and turns his eyes again on Barukh. “*Mi? Mi? Well?*”

“Yes,” Barukh answers again. He stares at the ring the foreman wears on the little finger of his right hand. Mechanically, Barukh slides his hand into his left pocket and rubs his bare ring finger with his thumb, a habitual gesture whenever he feels lost. It was she who had once given him a ring. Their friends had mocked the gift as hopelessly bourgeois, but he had worn the ring with pride. Until that day . . .

“All right,” the foreman exclaims. Barukh jumps as if jarred from sleep. “You punch in at ten o’clock.” The foreman steps quickly behind a counter made of raw plywood, pulls a pencil from behind his ear, and prepares to write. “How do you spell your name?”

Barukh spells his name.

“How old are you?” “Forty-one.”

"Wife? Children?"

"Gone."

"All right. Go and punch in. There under the clock. You mean you never punched a card before?"

"Never."

The foreman accompanies him to the clock and punches the white card for Barukh. "Your number is sixty-one. Your card must always lie right here. You punch in four times a day. What did you do before?"

"I've only been here for three weeks."

"I mean there, over there."

"In Warsaw I was a typesetter for a Polish newspaper."

"Go hang yourself up over there," the foreman chuckles, motioning toward Barukh's coat. "I'll put you to work at the press. Do you know how the press works?"

"No."

"All right. François!" The foreman's voice booms over the noise of the machines. From somewhere deep within the shop there is a flash of a striped red shirt. A scrawny, blond young man appears from between the racks hung with finished coats. He looks about sixteen years old. Two knots of curly hair cling moistly to his forehead. With both hands, he wipes the sweat from his boyish face.

Barukh hangs his coat on an empty coat rack. The solitary coat looks forlorn and even more bedraggled than it actually is. It is no longer the season for wearing heavy winter coats, but Barukh cannot help himself. He cannot seem to get warm in this country, and he does not find the coat too heavy for spring. He notices that the foreman and François wink at one another in amusement as they glance mockingly at the heavy coat.

"*Montrez garçon pressing*," the foreman says to François, indicating Barukh.

Barukh smiles shamefacedly at François and follows him through the shop, negotiating his way first among the racks of coats and then between the rows of roaring machines. Here and there workers look up as he passes. Some glance at him indifferently, then drop their eyes

back to their work. Others stare at him with curiosity. The indifferent eyes belong to men, the curious ones to women. The men working at the machines are all middle-aged, and almost all are bald. The women are almost all young and pretty. They are French. That little one over there, for instance, the one sewing buttons—what big, warm eyes she has. And the ringlets around her head are thin and so light that the glow from the lamp shines through them.

François and Barukh come to a place in the shop where eight presses are arranged in a large rectangle. Next to each press stands a half-naked young man with unkempt hair. Steam rises from the iron-boards.

The heat hits Barukh in the face. "Speak English?" François asks him with a smile.

"No. French a little."

"*Vous êtes français?*"

"No. I just lived in Paris for a while."

"Ah, Paris!" Barukh can feel his stock rising in the young man's eyes.

The work, it seems, is not too difficult. One must lay out the pockets, the belts, and other small items on a board and then lower the press by hand. The first few pieces Barukh tries do not come out well, but François assures him that he will learn. Of course he will learn. If only it weren't so hot here. He is covered in sweat even though the window fans are constantly whirring. There should be some air, even a little breeze. Why is it so hard to breathe? He had better take off his tie, unbutton his collar, and roll up his shirt sleeves. It's airier that way. But in another minute he again feels the sweat running down the back of his ears and onto his neck. The shirt sticks to his back and rivulets of moisture tickle his spine. He will just have to get used to it. It's merely a question of becoming acclimatized, he tells himself. But his head aches as if a thousand hammers were pounding inside, and his legs buckle beneath him—just as they did on that hot, dark day that has not yet come to an end.

A bell. What is that ringing suddenly? As if by magic all the ma-

chines stop. The shop catches its breath in the momentary silence. Of course: it is noon—lunchtime. At a loss, Barukh stands by his press and stares at the others rushing past him. No one looks at him.

Suddenly he finds himself confronted by a pair of warm eyes. The girl who sews the buttons is standing next to him. "*Comment-ça va?*" she asks. For the first time it strikes Barukh that French-Canadian French is full of charm. He attempts to smile but immediately senses that his smile is foolish and without cheer. "*Vous êtes Parisien, n'est-ce pas?*" she asks.

How could she know this so quickly? Barukh wonders. "Yes . . . no," he stammers, and explains that he only lived in Paris for a year.

"Oh, as a visitor."

"No, as a DP."

"Oh." She nods knowingly, but from the expression on her face he realizes that she has no idea what this means. "Have you punched your card?" she asks. He shakes his head. "So come."

He lets her lead him to the clock and slides his card in upside down. "No, not that way," she exclaims, taking the card out of his hand and sliding it in the proper way. She has a small hand. The pallor of her skin is even more evident against the bright red of her polished nails. She smiles at him in a friendly way. "Aren't you going home for lunch?"

"I have no home."

Her smile displays two rows of tiny, perfect white teeth. "So where do you sleep? On the street?"

"I have a room that I rent, but I have no home."

She finds this amusing and bursts into laughter, giving him a friendly slap on the back. "Let's go eat. You can get some Coke outside at the counter. Bon appétit."

He looks after her as she walks back down the length of the shop to her table. Her high-heeled shoes click against the floor with a light wooden tap. The white nylon blouse she is wearing trembles against her skin, and the large flowers on her colorful skirt wrap themselves around her legs like a dancing bouquet. The girl possesses a carefree lightheartedness that makes Barukh feel more acutely the weight of the

despair that he carries within himself.

He glances around the shop. Here and there workers sit by their machines absorbed in eating. Next to the window stands a group of Jews, chatting. The smoke from their cigarettes hangs in a cloud over their heads. Across the way, in the darker side of the hall, are groups of young men and women, some of whom lie stretched out across mounds of raw fabric. Barukh can hear their whistles and their laughter. They are French Canadian. Why didn't a Jewish girl come over to me? he wonders. He looks about him. Where are all the young Jewish women? Better they should be anywhere rather than here in this damp, sweaty shop. Better they should work in offices, or study, or be the mothers of small Jewish children.

Suddenly his thoughts focus on his own two children, who perished during the war. They are dressed in their holiday clothes and are seated on a high sofa. They peer into the camera and wait for the birdie to appear.

Barukh walks slowly over to the window. On the large table nearby lies an open *Forward*. A young man with an uneven bald spot, which he has attempted to cover with a thick strand of hair, lifts his dark, unshaven face as Barukh approaches. Barukh asks if that is today's *Forward*. The young man shakes his head and once more lowers his bald head over the paper. Barukh's eyes skim the headlines. Nearby stands a group of Jews, discussing politics. A heavy-set Jew waves his index finger threateningly in the face of his listeners. He is wearing a green Bermuda shirt with a flowery design in loud colors, and his collar is open.

"You have to be an American to appreciate who MacArthur was. Small thing, MacArthur! A folk hero!" he thunders. "What do you know about MacArthur? Listen . . ." He grabs the sleeve of one of his listeners, but the other, a flabby, middle-aged Jew with a pointy nose and small, merry eyes, laughs and interrupts him.

"Listen, shmisten." The flabby Jew pulls up his baggy pants. "Better ask us greenhorns who the folk heroes are. Believe me, mister, the biggest folk hero would be a lot bigger if you made him a head shorter. And you better cut out that song and dance about being an American."

"Did I knock the crown off your head when I said that you have to be an American?" asks the Jew in the Bermuda shirt, nervously winding the large gold watch on his wrist.

"Heaven forbid, my friend! You're too short to reach my crown! Do you really think that we greenhorns know nothing and understand nothing? Believe me, there are many things you could learn from us."

"Like what, for instance?"

"A little bit of humanity, a little bit of friendliness."

"*Oh va!* No more, no less!"

"You should know that," intercedes another greenhorn. "If you had come to us, after the kinds of troubles we've lived through, we would have welcomed you with open arms."

"Oh, when will there ever be peace between the old-timers and the newcomers?" one of the listeners sighs.

"When the Messiah comes," smiles the Jew with the merry eyes.

"Do you think that they will welcome the Messiah better than they did us? He will be a greenhorn, after all."

"Their Messiah has already come. They don't need anything more, those old-timers."

"Why are you talking nonsense?" explodes the Jew in the Bermuda shirt. "Do you think that my Messiah has come already? Of course he has. I've blackened my life with forty years' work at the sewing machine. Forty years, I tell you. And I'm still at the same level as you. What do you want from me, anyway? What have I taken from you? What do I owe you? I like this country. What are you going to do about it? You don't approve, so go back where you came from."

An uncomfortable silence falls on the group, which disperses slowly and with seeming regret. For the first time someone takes note of Barukh. "Are you new?"

Barukh nods.

"Where do you come from?"

"From Paris."

"A Parisian?"

"No. From Warsaw."

"Were you in Russia?"

"No. In the camps."

"Did you run into anyone from Ozorkov?"

"Only after the war."

"Did you ever hear of the family Zlotnik?"

"No."

A new circle has formed around Barukh and his questioner. Someone else eagerly addresses a question to Barukh: "Did you say you are from Warsaw? Where in the city did you live?"

"On Krochmalna Street."

"I'm from Otvotsk. My father had a cigarette stand next to the highway. You probably know . . ."

Otvotsk. Barukh sees himself with her on one of their first excursions together. He breathes in the air of Otvotsk, inhaling deeply. Cigarettes! He is suddenly overcome by a powerful urge to smoke. He deserts his companions and hurries away to the stand where his coat is hanging solitary and forsaken. He puts his hand into his pocket, extracts the pack of cigarettes, and lights one. He inhales deeply. The air of Otvotsk burns and grates against his throat.

Suddenly the little French Canadian with the warm eyes is at his side again. The unease inside him grows. "Give me a cigarette," her red lips smile at him. He extends the pack of cigarettes toward her. She pulls one out and puts it in her mouth, waiting for a light. Her mouth is close to him, and there is a pleasant coolness emanating from her fingers. He feels drawn to this carefree girl, just as earlier he had been drawn to his cigarettes. "Did you enjoy it?" she asks, seating herself on a nearby table.

He watches her. "What?"

"What do you mean *what?* The lunch."

He smiles crookedly and shakes his head. She plays with the folds of her colorful skirt and stares at him steadily with her laughing eyes. "Tell me something about Paris," she implores in an oddly childlike voice. "To have lived for a whole year in Paris! *Mon Dieu!* Some people have all the luck."

He looks at her legs dangling from the table. Small blonde hairs peek through her nylon stockings. "Paris?"

"Yes, Paris."

Suddenly the girl vanishes, and Barukh sees himself in a dirty Paris hotel room. He remembers how he had to be constantly registering with the police and how he had to stand in line for days on end in front of the JOINT distribution offices. He remembers all the worries about having proper papers, about getting the proper tickets for the boat. "Yes, certainly, a beautiful city," he mutters.

"*N'est-ce pas?*" she exclaims. "Paris is my dream. What sorts of things did you see there? Tell me."

"Oh, the Eiffel Tower . . ." He remembers a walk he took on a brilliant Saturday. The Trocadero was bathed in light. The fountains spat streams of crystalline water into the air. He did not have enough francs to buy a ticket to ride up the Eiffel Tower.

"And I'm sure you went walking on the Champs Élysées," she remarks with enthusiasm.

"Of course." He sees the Champs Élysées as it was in the blue summer twilight. He spent many hours wandering about there until, one day, he was accosted by a vision that froze his heart. He saw a woman standing by the exit to the metro. It was she! His wife. She had a suitcase in her hand and was looking uncertainly about her. He knew that this could not be his wife because he had seen his wife in the Umshlagplatz, the gathering place for those about to be deported to their deaths. Even so, with bated breath, he started to run toward the woman only to be confronted by a pair of strange, frightened eyes as he drew near her.

"And how are the Parisian women dressed? Very stylish and elegant, *n'est-ce pas?*" The girl looks into his face as if she could find there the entire splendor of Paris. "Why are you silent? Tell me." Suddenly she giggles. "I guess you're not an expert on women's clothing. You certainly don't look like one. But you surely went to the opera and the theater every night, didn't you?"

He remembers the few open-air concerts that he attended in Paris, and the gnawing despair that accompanied his return home after each

one. His wife had played the violin. On their way to the ghetto the violin had fallen from her hand, and an oncoming wagon filled with furniture had run over it.

"They have some wonderful nightclubs there, don't they?" The girl's eyes are no longer laughing. They are large and eager. There is such a thirst in them! "They drink champagne there as if it were water, the music plays, and people dance in the half darkness while the voice of Edith Piaf comes over the loudspeaker, '*Je vous aime . . .*'" She bends closer to him and flutters her lashes seductively. But his desire for her has dissipated. "And tell me"—she is not yet tired of questioning him—"have you seen other countries as well?"

"I've seen them."

"And I've never been anywhere except Montreal and Trois-Rivières. That's where I was born. If you only knew how much I like to hear stories about other countries!" Once again her face takes on a childish, dreamy quality. He would gladly stroke her head as if she were a little girl. "Where else have you been? Tell me," she implores.

"In Poland," he answers. "That's where I was born, in a city called Warsaw."

"Oh, Warsaw is really far! Did you like the city?"

"In the past I did."

"And today?"

"Today the city seems alien to me."

"Why? Well, of course, it's been a long time since you've been there."

"I am still there."

"What do you mean?"

"My childhood is there, and my youth is there, and my dearest possessions are all there. Everything that mattered to me is there, and it is all gone."

"I don't understand what you're saying."

"How can you understand? You were born in Trois-Rivières."

"Never mind that stuff. Tell me where else you've been. Go on. Tell me."

"I was in Czechoslovakia, in Austria, in Germany, in Italy . . ."  
 "Jésu Marie! You've seen the entire world! Were you so rich? You must have been one of the richest people in the world."

"No, one of the poorest."

"You were a businessman, weren't you?"

"No. A DP."

"I don't understand."

"In English it's called a 'displaced person.'"

"Oh, you mean a displeased person. That's what I am too." She breaks into a full-throated laugh. Her voice is lusty and youthful. How long it has been since Barukh heard such laughter! But he cannot join in her mirth. He does not even smile. He feels suddenly claustrophobic and ill at ease. He leaves the girl sitting where she is and strides toward the door.

At the exit, behind the plywood counter, sits the foreman, holding a bottle of Coke to his mouth. "Hey, you! Come over here," he calls to Barukh.

Barukh's heart skips a beat. Someone else once called to him in just that tone of voice. The foreman takes Barukh's measure with a pair of cold eyes. Someone else once took his measure in just that way. Barukh has a feeling that this coming encounter is a replay of an encounter that happened some time in the past. Yes. He is in the concentration camp. There is about to be a selection. He hides behind the barrack. If he shows up at the selection he is lost. He is too bloated. Suddenly he hears a voice. "Hey, you, come over here!" Before him he sees the Jewish kapo. A raised fist lands on his back. Barukh falls into the mud. "Come. You are going to clean the latrines!" the kapo barks. At that moment Barukh feels the stirrings of love for the fist that knocked him down. He is ready to kiss it in gratitude because it has granted him his life.

"So how do you like the job?" The foreman's voice sounds mocking.

All of Barukh's senses are awake. This is not the camp. This is freedom; this is the God-blessed country of Canada. The foreman's voice grates on him. "I told you already, I like it," he snaps.

The foreman rises and bangs the bottle of Coke against the plywood table. "So you told me already, eh? So now the question is, do I like you? He's told me already, the big shot with the manicured fingernails! That's some way to talk!" From under the counter, he abruptly pulls out the work Barukh has done in the previous few hours and lays it out with jerky fingers on the countertop. Curious workers gather around, holding sandwiches in their hands and guzzling drinks. The foreman stares at them and shouts self-righteously. "Good work, eh? Ruined a few dozen pockets and belts."

"I told you that I'm not a presser," Barukh coldly replies.

"So you told me again! You never stop telling me. Maybe you will tell me now how to run my business."

"I don't know what you want from me."

"He doesn't know what I want from him! You hear that? The guy ruins a few dozen pockets and belts and hasn't got a clue what the matter is. I ask you again, do you want this job?" Barukh carefully nods yes. The foreman wags a finger at him. "So once and for all you should know that I am the boss here and not you, greenhorn! You do as I say and as I please. And if you don't like it, you can go to hell." Having said his piece, the foreman reseats himself on the stool.

Barukh can feel his hands knotting into fists. One stride and he is standing in front of the plywood counter, his hot face breathing into the face of the foreman. "You can't talk to me like that!" he shouts.

But the foreman's eyes have lost their metallic edge. Unconcerned, he pushes Barukh out of the way, un packs his smoked-meat sandwich, and bites into it with large, eager teeth.

Barukh is transported by his own rage. "Don't you talk to me like that! This is a free country. Understand?"

The foreman chews, shrugs, puts a finger to his temple, and smiles at the others, motioning toward Barukh. "Crazy."

The others smile back meaningfully.

Barukh is beside himself: "You are not the boss of my life, do you hear? I am a human being, just like you. Just like you!" he shouts, his voice growing increasingly louder the smaller he feels inside. "You will

not curse me! No! I've heard enough curses in my life."

"So why don't you get lost!" the foreman laughs. "Did you ever hear such a thing?" He turns to the others. "I'm supposed to talk to him through a silken handkerchief. Who do you think you are, greenhorn? And *where* do you think you are? In Bronfman's living room, maybe? This is a shop."

"Yes, a shop," Barukh retorts hotly. "But a modern shop, not from a hundred years ago. Those curses were fine then."

"Really? You would prefer some modern curses, then? Well, I'm an old-fashioned foreman. Go, do me something!"

"But we are modern workers. We won't stand to be insulted by such nothings like you. We have unions."

The workers, who have been listening to this exchange in silence, suddenly break into laughter. One of them slaps Barukh on the back in a comradely way. "Here is not like back home, my friend."

Someone else waves his hand derisively. "This one is a real greenhorn from greenhorn land."

Barukh gives up the argument. He feels lost. He is alone, utterly alone, in this strange place. All around him the workers are conversing in heated tones, discussing unions and wages. The foreman stares at Barukh with mock-innocent eyes. He unpacks another smoked-meat sandwich and bites into it with obvious enjoyment. Barukh feels silly. He wipes the sweat from his forehead with a dirty piece of Kleenex and does not know what to do with himself. The bell rings. Still conversing, the workers go to the clock and, one after another, punch in their cards.

The little French Canadian appears next to Barukh. "Here. Have a Chiclet." Her white hand pushes a piece of chewing gum between his lips. The tips of her fingers are wonderfully cool against his mouth.

Suddenly the foreman stands up and calls, "François!" The thin boy with the large mop of hair appears by his side. "*Montrez garçon* pressing! Good pressing. Remember! And if you don't, may the holy plague take you, you goyish blockhead."

"Okay, boss," François nods smilingly, revealing two protruding front teeth. He pulls Barukh by the sleeve. "Come on."

Barukh would like to run away, but the foreman is smiling at him. "Why are you standing there like a wooden pole with your eyes popping out? Go punch your card." The foreman's voice sounds paternal, forgiving.

Barukh punches his card. This time he does it correctly. Then he returns to the press machine. The heat beats against his face. Once again the sweat runs in streams down his back. The fans whir, the machines roar rhythmically. The little French Canadian is sewing buttons somewhere between the racks of finished clothing. Barukh chews on his gum. A drop of sweetness melts in his mouth and soothes his temper.