

Nigger-Lovin' Jew

TOM JOHNSON

I MET Sam the night I arrived in Steelton. I was a Communist organizer, the first to reach that section of the South. My instructions were: "Go to Steelton, connect yourself with local Negro and white workers and build the Party organization. Report regularly to headquarters." It was impossible to be much more explicit. All we in the North knew was that Steelton was the nerve center of Southern industry, that wages there were considerably lower than in any other section of the country and that the violently open-shop A.B.S. Corporation owned the town—lock, stock and barrel. We had just one connection in the whole territory; his name was Sam Beckman and he was a subscriber to the *Freiheit*, the Communist daily in the Jewish language. Beyond this I knew nothing of him.

It was past midnight when my bus pulled up before the frowzy, dim-lit station and came to a stop. I had very little money and late as it was, decided to look up Beckman at once; perhaps I could stay the night at his place and save the price of a hotel room.

Instructed by the night porter, I found my street without difficulty and started down it, watching the numbers as I went. It ran through the heart of the Negro business section, but at this hour it was pretty well deserted. A couple of Negro miners, coming off a late shift and dead tired, clumped stolidly by me in their wet pit clothes, their red-rimmed eyes glued on the sidewalk ahead of them. A soft voice called from a doorway, and the graceful figure of a Negro girl, her childish face rouged and painted, detached itself from the shadow and smiled at me timidly.

Number 739 at last! It was evidently a store, housed in a ramshackle one-story frame building. Closed, of course, and not even a night light burning. But as I pressed my face against the window, I thought I saw a thread of light in the rear. I pounded the door with a will and after a minute or two a light was switched on and the door opened. It framed a tall, gangling figure—barefoot and in long cotton drawers. From their setting in a narrow, sensitive face, now covered with a two-days' growth of stubble, a pair of abstracted, unhappy eyes looked me over without interest.

"What do you want?" he asked quietly.

"Is Sam Beckman here?"

"Yes, that is I," he replied in a strongly accented voice.

"The editor of the *Freiheit* gave me a letter to you and asked me to look you up."

"The *Freiheit*! Then you are a comrade?" I nodded. He stared at me incredulously for a moment and then repeated, "A comrade! A comrade here in Steelton! But come in, dear comrade, you are welcome!" He hung

his arms about me and fairly dragged me through the door. "Zaller!" he called to someone behind the curtain that separated the living quarters from the front of the store, "Come here quick! A comrade from the North has arrived!" He pulled me along with him, his arm still around my shoulders, and flung the curtain aside. A sweating porpoise of a man was swinging himself upright on the bed. He was fat and broad and he was much excited.

None of us slept that night. For years these two had been isolated from their world; the world of the revolutionary movement, and they could not hear enough. Was it true the Party gained strength steadily in the North? Then why so few votes in the last election? How was the miners' strike going? Did I think war against the Soviet Union would come this year or next? Between questions they told me their story.

Both had been needle workers in up-state New York when the slump of '21 put them on the street. Somehow in their anxious search for jobs they had wandered South. Two years of odd jobs followed until at last they decided to pool their resources and go into business. This pitiful little grocery store was the result.

"For seven years we have been chained to this hell hole of a South," Sam declaimed passionately. "We could not leave, for who would buy our stock and fixtures? We tried to agitate, to work for the movement at first but we are foreigners—Jews. These Southern barbarians hate us. And because we are white the Negroes do not trust us and will not listen. We have been like dead men, lost to our comrades, lost to ourselves. But now all will be changed! With you, an American, here to help us, to show us how, we will work, we will build the Party. Only tell us what to do and we will do it. This I pledge!"

Sam kept that pledge. For months his grubby store was our headquarters. We slept there, always three and sometimes four in the big bed. We ate from the shelves of the store and cooked our food on the pot-bellied stove in the corner. We fitted the back room with a door and muffled the walls with quilts so that the sound of my typewriter and the mimeograph machine running off leaflets would not attract the attention of those in the store. The first Communist leaflet to appear in Steelton, or in the state for that matter, was run off in that room. And eight men—four Negroes and four whites—gathered there late one night behind drawn shades to form the first unit or "nucleus" of the Communist Party in the deep South.

Sam's customers were mostly Negroes of the neighborhood. It was the first year of the crisis, but already many of them were close to actual starvation. A man can't save on wages

of 15 cents an hour, and when he's laid off—well, his family will go hungry in three weeks. Sam couldn't turn them down. As the greasy ledger in which he kept his charge accounts grew steadily fatter, the stock on the shelves dwindled in proportion. There was less and less money in the till to buy fresh supplies; the unemployed were slowly eating up the store.

It worried Zaller, but to Sam it was a relief. To him the store was a personal enemy which kept him from giving all his time to the movement. To him it summed up all the pettiness and chicanery that is the essence of the petty bourgeois soul. He hated it and despised it. On occasion he spat upon it. More than once, when the arrival of a customer found Sam busy at the crank of the mimeograph, or in the midst of a heated discussion on Communist policy in the back room, I have seen him open the door a crack, stick out an angry face, and shout to the astounded customer: "I'm busy! Can't wait on you now. You'll have to come back later or go somewhere else!" The door would slam shut and Sam would dive once more into the center of the argument.

Later, when we were about to hold our first mass meeting of the unemployed in Center Park, Sam insisted that he and Zaller both attend the meeting. We three left the store together. Sam turned the key and hung a crudely painted sign from the knob. It read:

STORE CLOSED

HAVE GONE TO CENTER PARK TO DEMONSTRATE FOR MORE RELIEF. GO THOU AND DO LIKEWISE.

S. Beckman, Prop.

Then the terror clamped down. The store was raided and all Communist literature confiscated. Sam protested to the prosecutor and demanded its return. He was told the police would return only such of his books as might also be found on the shelves of the public library. Sam diligently hunted through the local library and emerged triumphant with a copy of the *Communist Manifesto* and Sinclair's *The Jungle*. That's all he got back from the police. He was insistent and threatened to sue the city for the return of his property. The police were annoyed and Sam was promptly thrown in jail as a "suspicious person." They held him 72 hours while the police terrorized Zaller at the store.

They decided to drive him out of business and out of town. Inspectors from the Department of Health appeared and nothing suited them. State men raided the store on the pretext that Sam sold cigarettes without affixing the four-cent state tax stamp. They found one pack without a stamp and Zaller pawned his ring to pay the \$50 fine.

