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**Levy's Testament**

**Novel**

(Original German title: Levys Testament. Roman)

approx. 144 pages, Clothbound

Expected publication date: 19 April 2021

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Sample translation by Laura Wagner

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*For Ginger Joe*

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In the winter of 1972, I flew to London along with some other students from the Berlin Film Academy for an underground festival. We had heard of 'Cinema Action'. The group had risen to fame with films about the May of '68 in Paris, about the dockers' strikes at the dockyards of Glasgow and about the Irish resistance in Londonderry. The Academy had paid for our flights. I didn't really want to watch any films. All I wanted was to get out of Berlin. Out of that city where caution encases me like armour while the police is searching for a man who has disappeared from my life and has gone underground with fake papers. Always on guard, not a single thoughtless step, not one treacherous word, not creating a trail that could lead to the wanted persons. Finally being able to walk along a street light-heartedly again, without glancing over my shoulder to see if someone is following. I ended up in a narrow brick house in Holloway. Three stories, a steep flight of stairs, two small rooms on every storey. Windows that pull up. Like a guillotine if you stick your head out. At the very bottom the coin-op for the electric heating. Once your small change is spent things get cold and damp.

The house is always full of people. A constant coming and going. In the mornings, the bacon curls up next to the slices of toast on the grill above the stove, eggs are cracked into the pan. There is always someone to boil the kettle again, hang a handful of yellow Lipton tea bags into a battered aluminium pot and leave the tea to draw until it is so bitter that it makes your teeth feel furry.

It's not clear who actually lives in the house and who only comes for the editorial meetings of the 'Islington Gutter Press', a newspaper that campaigns for the rights of the inhabitants of occupied teardowns. In the evenings, when the articles have been written, other people sit around the kitchen table and compose statements of solidarity with eight imprisoned anarchists who are members of the militant group Angry Brigade. According to the motto 'We attack property not people,' the Angry Brigade is said to have ignited homemade explosive devices in front of the embassy of Franco's Spain and the house of labour minister Robert Carr and destroyed a BBC broadcasting van at the Miss World pageant. In the summer of 1971, four women and four men were arrested in Stoke Newington, a borough neighbouring Holloway. Since then, they appear in the press as the Stoke Newington Eight next to photos of the labour minister's devastated kitchen. The minister had been responsible for an encroachment on the unions' rights that had caused a wave of strikes across the country.

The group of supporters preparing for the impending trial of the eight anarchists around the kitchen table in Holloway at night creates a montage of the photo of the destroyed ministerial kitchen and the image of a small child at a mouldering sink in one of London's slums for a pamphlet. The kitchen, it says, can be repaired within three days. But, reads the caption underneath the other photo, can there ever be amends for people growing up in such filth?

The activities in the house in Holloway are similar to those in the rooms of the factory floor I share with friends in Berlin and that is known to the police. Disconcerting bits of information rush in, rumours about house searches circulate, people disappear hurriedly while others appear suddenly, and I don't know whether I have jumped out of the frying pan and into the fire. At night, I lie in bed under my long rabbit fur coat and shiver. Then I feel the naked, warm body of a man I have met before next to me. I had been standing in the spacious floor in the second backyard, leaning on a mop, when he walked across the freshly scrubbed floors in boots and a heavy coat. His hair was black and long. Round yellow glasses. My son thought he was Chinese. He could have been anything, Indian, Mexican, Mongolian. But not English.

Instead of going to the cinema with the other students, I go to Brixton with the Englishman. We take the bus not the tube. The IRA bombs are an omnipresent threat. Those who can avoid climbing down into the underworld. One escalator after the other, deep down into a tunnel from which there is no escape in case of an attack. We remain above ground, sit close together on the upper deck in the first row and cross the city in an endless drive from northeast to southwest. Sometimes we leave our lookout, walk on foot for a while, get a sandwich and catch the next bus. The long wall of Holloway Prison along the right side of Parkhurst Road. This is where the four women of the Stoke Newington Eight are awaiting their trial. On the weekends, friends from the Defence Group take position in front of the prison and use amplifiers to play Jimmy Cliff songs as they sing along. 'The harder they come, the harder they'll fall.'

We carry on towards Carnaby Street, where the Englishman teaches at the Nelson School of English. To our left are Holborn, Kingsway, the former Ready Steady Go studios with lip-syncing performances by the Beatles, Donovan, The Who, Van Morrison and the Rolling Stones, every Friday night on TV. The Stones changed his life a long time ago, the Englishman says. He is fifteen when he finds himself sitting opposite Charly Watts on the Bakerloo Line, which takes him from Kingsbury to his school in Cricklewood. He scratches an autograph onto his monthly pass with a broken biro. He impersonates Mick Jagger in the Ready Steady Go studio and wins first prize. He runs home with the certificate in his hand, through SoHo, Mayfair, through the rich neighbourhoods bordering Hyde Park. At Marble Arch he enters Edgware Road, formerly part of Roman Watling Street, stretching fifteen kilometres. He runs through the night until his surroundings become poor, passes a water reservoir, a small lake. Then he turns onto Kingsbury Road, runs and runs, until he reaches Central Parade at dawn, a brick house with a shop on the ground floor in which his mother sells Bata shoes. The red sign glows above the shopwindow. Flat on the second floor. Kitchen, sitting room and a cubbyhole he shares with his older sister. When she marries, he says, he'll have the small room to himself.

A photo that he carries in his briefcase shows the edge of the sofa that the parents fold out at night and push together again during the day to sit on. It's by the window. Dark cover with burst seams. A coverlet on the seat which barely hides the holes. A dart board has fallen off the wall and slid under the table. On the edge of a low armchair a boy of about eight years in school uniform. He looks at the camera with a start. Wide black eyes in the flashlight. The shorts too wide, the jumper too tight, the sleeves too short. The shirt collar askew. He sits on

the edge of the armchair with his knees pressed together. He doesn't know what to do with his hands. With his fingers interlaced he clicks his nails. A small black and white photograph that shows where he comes from – filled with childhood sorrow and loneliness.

On the second photo he could be about ten years old. He is sitting on the same armchair, but everything else is different, the poverty has been cleared away, the background has been arranged for the picture. A lamp, a clock on a sideboard with rounded edges made from dark wood, a tall buffet. Now he no longer cowers on the edge of the seat shyly. On this photo, he is upright in the chair, again in school uniform, well-fitting shorts, knee-length socks with a dark trim. Hair parted, looking dead ahead. He isn't looking at the camera. He is looking straight past it into the future. He has just been accepted to the Haberdashers' Aske's Boys' School. He is an exceptional student, one who comes from the very lowest part of society. His father is not a social climber like the soccer player David Beckham, who is planning on sending his children to that same school in the future and is considered too trendy, too 'posh.' You can sense that the boy on the photo has made a decision. He knows where he wants to go. 'There is no such word as can't,' his mother had demanded from him. He is going to keep his word at school. A winner. Someone with a future.

His mother's ancestors, the Englishman says, had emigrated from Poland to Odessa in the second half of the nineteenth century. But her father, Lewis Granovsky, left Odessa during the pogroms. That could have been around 1894. Granovsky wasn't a Jewish name but Polish aristocracy, probably a squire who had passed on his name to the caretakers, who were usually Jewish. As a teenager he sets out for Paris on foot. When he arrives, he is sixteen and learns the trade of the 'French polishers,' the skill of applying a particularly silky gloss to furniture and musical instruments with a polish of shellac and alcohol.

The antisemitism that flares up during the Dreyfus affair takes him to London. He is said to have arrived in the East End around the turn of the century, just like five thousand other Jews who were flocking to Bethnal Green or Hackney. He deletes the last two syllables of his last name, adds an 'n' and marries the girl Bella from Kiev as Lewis Grann. Ten children. Norah, the Englishman's mother, is born in 1910. One girl dies in the first year of her life. Another daughter, Hetty, is born with spina bifida. The Englishman remembers hospital visits, metre-long bandages underneath loose-fitting dresses and a small woman, white flowers in her hair, adorned as though for a bridegroom that will never exist in her life. One of the six sons is talked about to this day. Norah Grann's memories and unfulfilled hopes shroud this brother. On the third of September 1939, when England enters the war against Germany, he was planning to listen to a debate in parliament. But since it was a hot day, he jumps into the Thames to cool down and drowns, at twenty years of age. On the only picture, the Englishman says, on which his mother looks happy, she has put her arm around a young man in light-coloured sportswear. A folded-up newspaper in his hand he is leaning on her, taken just before his death on a riverside covered in gravel.

It's uncertain whether Lewis Grann was able to provide for his large family as a 'French polisher.' He dies in 1930. He is buried on the Jewish cemetery on Oldfield Road, corner of Horney Lane, for ten pounds and seven shillings, not far from Holloway Road where we got on the first bus. It's a sum the family can barely muster. What forever remains, the Englishman says, is his mother Norah's lament for her lost youth. Because Bella, his grandmother, doesn't understand the world, is unable to read or write, only speaks Yiddish and no English, Norah, the oldest daughter, is forced to take care of her siblings. She is twenty-seven when she marries.

When Bella can no longer pay for her flat, she moves from one of her many children's flat to the next. Some of them have made something of themselves through gambling, others, like the Englishman's mother, are left behind. When the old woman stops off in the flat above

the Bata shop for a few weeks, she sleeps on an armchair with a footrest in the kitchen. Sometimes her grandson gives up his bed in the cubbyhole for his grandmother, whose language he doesn't understand.

Joseph, the Englishman's father, called Ginger Joe because of his red hair, deals in cheap clothes he buys in bulk and sells out of his old, dark-blue Austin van. For as long as he can remember his father has been taking him along to the matches of his football club. He sits in the front of the van next to him. The clothes hangers on the rail slide back and forth in the bends as they drive across the city to the stadium of Tottenham Hotspur. His father opens his own shop with a partner. But the business fails. For the next few years, he stands bent over a table sorting letters at night. When he can barely manage to straighten up anymore and the pain in his back becomes unbearable, he stops working for the post office. Now he drives a taxi. Still, the first thing he does when he gets home is to put the kettle on and bring his wife a cup of tea in bed when her heart tightens her chest. His favourite fare is Graham Chapman of Monty Python, who uses him to drive to the studios and is later going to play the lead in *Life of Brian*.

His father's family, the Englishman says, also emigrated from the East at the end of the nineteenth century. But he doesn't know the name with which they arrived from Poland. They are said to have been tailors. Leah, his father's mother, a bitter old woman, visits on some holidays. The Englishman grows up with the feeling that something isn't right, something isn't said but kept secret. 'They did not look after me' remains the only thing his father, this lumbering man whom he loves, ever said about his family.

We reach the bank of the Thames via Vauxhall Bridge, change buses, drive a long way southward along Brixton Road to Brixton Hill. By the time we get off the bus on Jebb Avenue he has told me everything about his family. He doesn't know any more. And there won't be any more to add – until the day he gets a call, forty years later.

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