EMIL

Story BY HARVEY PEKAR

Art BY Gary Dumm + Greg Budgett

FROM 1959 TO 1971 I LIVED IN AN AREA - YOU COULDN'T EVEN CALL IT A NEIGHBORHOOD - BETWEEN THE CAMPUS OF CASE WESTERN RESERVE UNIVERSITY AND THE BLACK GHETTO. AS TIME WENT ON IT BECAME MORE AND MORE CRIME-RIDDEN AND RUN DOWN. EVENTUALLY THE ROW HOUSE WHERE I LIVED WAS TORN DOWN.

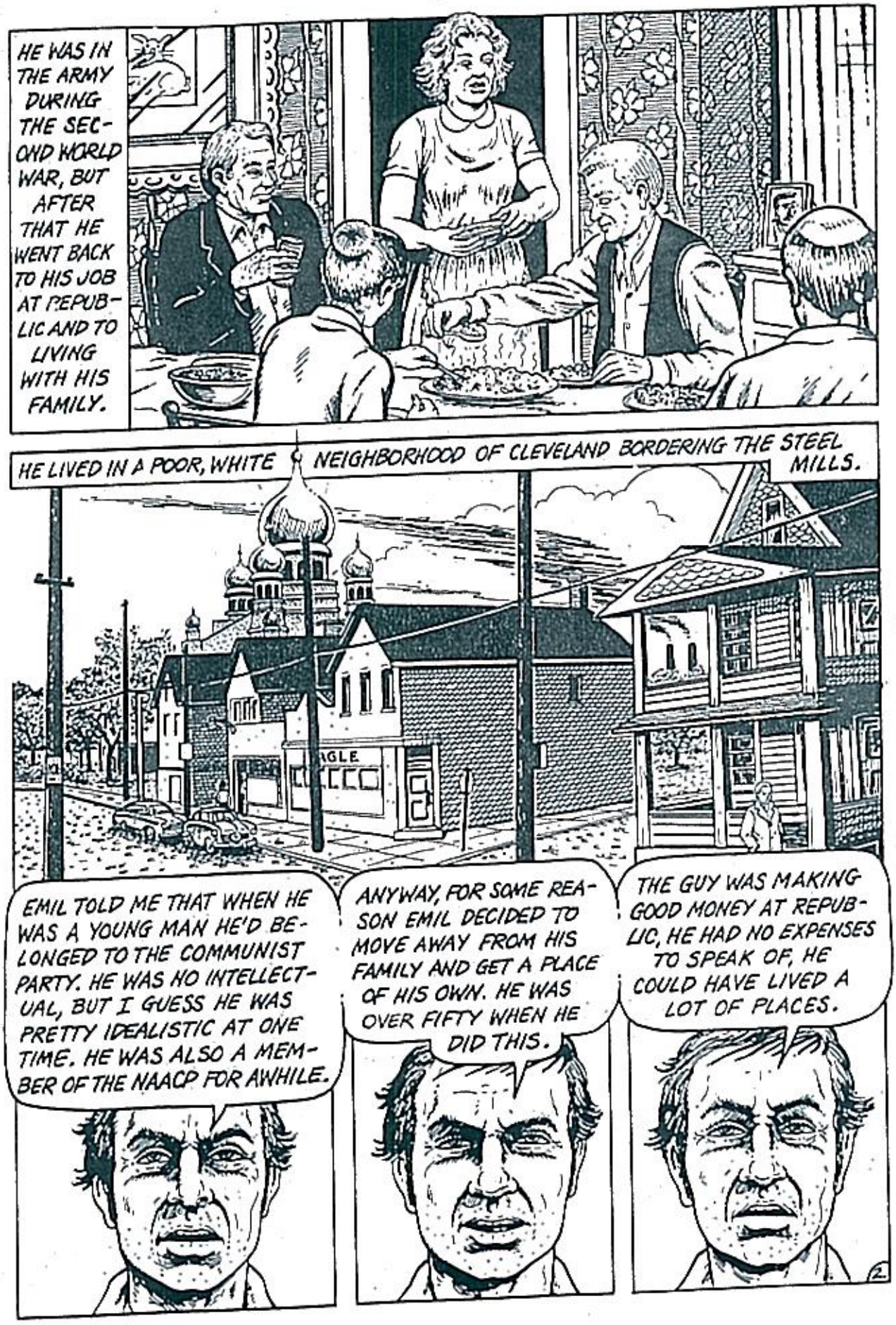
©1980 BY HARVEY PEKAR

I WANT TO TELL YOU ABOUT A GUY WHO, IN THE MIDDLE 60'S, LIVED NEXT DOOR TO ME IN THAT BUILDING.

HIS NAME WAS EMIL. HE WAS ABOUT FIFTY-FIVE YEARS OLD WHEN I MET HIM. HE WAS RUTHENIAN. A RUTHENIAN IS ESSENTIALLY A UKRANIAN WHO LIVED IN A PLACE IN THE CARPATHIAN MOUNTAIN REGION CALLED RUTHENIA. IT WAS ONCE PART OF THE AUSTRO-HUNGARIAN EMPIRE AND LATER OF CZECHOSLOVAKIA. NOW IT'S PART OF THE U.S.S.R. RUTHENIANS ARE ORTHODOX IN RELIGION, NOT CATHOLIC.

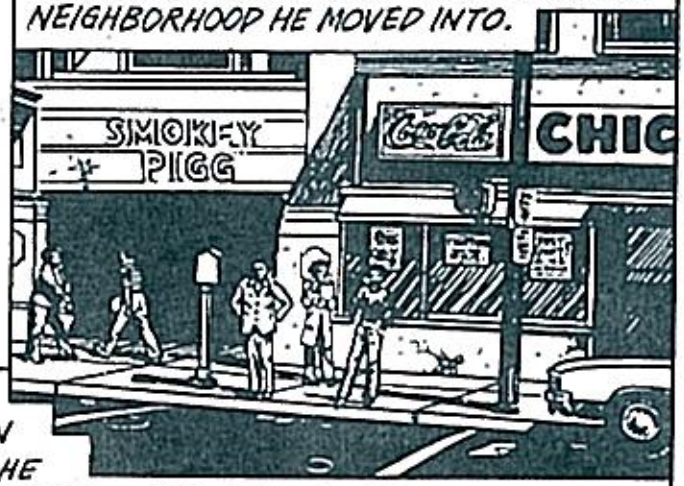
EMIL WAS THE SON OF IMMIGRANT PARENTS. HE WAS AN OLD BACHELOR, A LONER. HE PROBABLY NEVER MARRIED BECAUSE HE WAS AFRAID OF WOMEN. IN SOME WAYS HE WAS PRETTY BACKWARD SOCIALLY.

HE WAS A LABORER AT REPUBLIC STEEL. HE'D WORKED THERE SINCE HE WAS A TEENAGER IN THE 1930'S. HE WAS INVOLVED IN THE "LITTLE STEEL" STRIKE OF 1937, DURING WHICH HE WAS SHOT IN THE HAND BY A GUARD WHILE HE WAS ON A PICKET LINE.


HE WAS IN THE ARMY DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR, BUT AFTER THAT HE WENT BACK TO HIS JOB AT REPUBLIC AND TO LIVING WITH HIS FAMILY.
HE LIVED IN A POOR, WHITE NEIGHBORHOOD OF CLEVELAND BORDERING THE STEEL MILLS.
EMIL TOLD ME THAT WHEN HE WAS A YOUNG MAN HE'D BELONGED TO THE COMMUNIST PARTY. HE WAS NO INTELLECTUAL, BUT I GUESS HE WAS PRETTY IDEALISTIC AT ONE TIME. HE WAS ALSO A MEMBER OF THE NAACP FOR AWHILE.
ANYWAY, FOR SOME REASON EMIL DECIDED TO MOVE AWAY FROM HIS FAMILY AND GET A PLACE OF HIS OWN. HE WAS OVER FIFTY WHEN HE DID THIS.
THE GUY WAS MAKING GOOD MONEY AT REPUBLIC, HE HAD NO EXPENSES TO SPEAK OF, HE COULD HAVE LIVED A LOT OF PLACES.
2.

BUT WHERE HE CHOSE TO LIVE WAS IN THE HOUGH AREA. AT THE TIME HE MOVED INTO HOUGH, IT WAS IN TRANSITION FROM A POOR WHITE TO A BLACK NEIGHBORHOOD. THERE WERE ONLY A FEW WHITES LEFT.

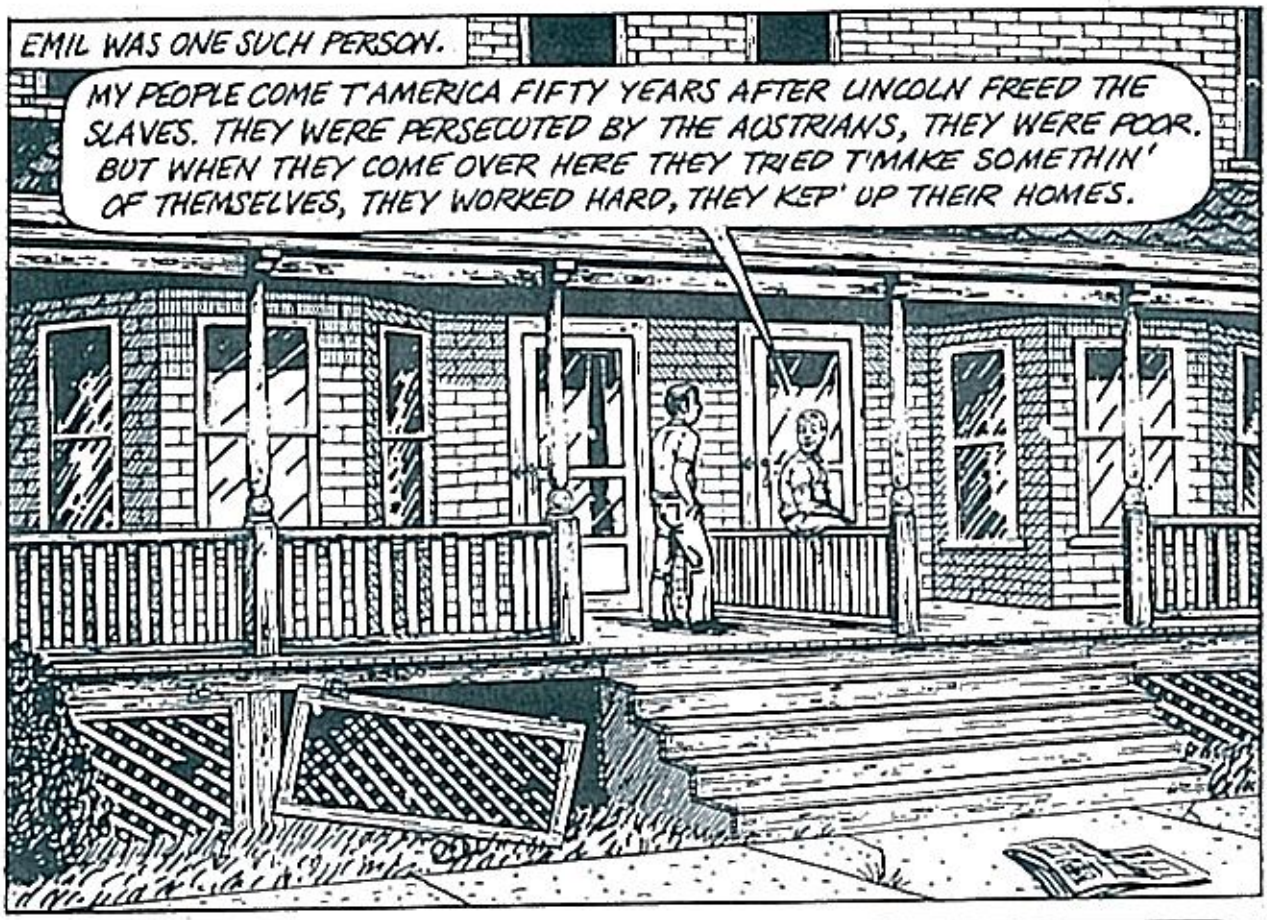
NOW EMIL WAS A NAIVE GUY. HE'D LIVED MOST OF HIS LIFE IN AN ALMOST COMPLETELY WHITE COMMUNITY. HE WASN'T FAMILIAR WITH THE RACIAL HATRED THAT EXISTED IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD HE MOVED INTO.



SINCE EMIL WAS THEN IN THE NAACP AND BELIEVED IN THE BROTHERHOOD OF MAN HE WASN'T PREPARED FOR THE TREATMENT HE GOT.

NOW THAT'S ONE OF THE REAL TRAGEDIES ABOUT THE RACIAL CONFLICT IN THIS COUNTRY. IT JUST GOES ON AND ON. WHITES UNDOUBTEDLY DESERVE THE VAST MAJORITY OF THE BLAME. BLACKS DIDN'T ASK TO GET YANKED OUT OF AFRICA AND ENSLAVED IN THE AMERICAS. THEY DIDN'T ASK TO HAVE THE FABRIC OF THEIR SOCIETY TORN APART AND TO BE SYSTEMATICALLY DISCRIMINATED AGAINST AFTER THE CIVIL WAR.

NATURALLY ENOUGH MANY BLACKS CAME TO HATE WHITES- ALL WHITES. THEY SOMETIMES RETALIATED AGAINST WHITES VIOLENTLY WHEN THEY COULD. AS THE GENERATIONS WENT BY ORIGINAL CAUSES WERE FORGOTTEN, INNOCENT PEOPLE WERE, AT TIMES, THE VICTIMS OF RACIAL HATRED. AND MANY, NOT REALIZING WHY THEY SHOULD BE HURT, ULTIMATELY BECAME RACISTS THEMSELVES.


EMIL WAS ONE SUCH PERSON.
MY PEOPLE COME T'AMERICA FIFTY YEARS AFTER LINCOLN FREED THE SLAVES. THEY WERE PERSECUTED BY THE AUSTRIANS, THEY WERE POOR. BUT WHEN THEY COME OVER HERE THEY TRIED T'MAKE SOMETHIN' OF THEMSELVES, THEY WORKED HARD, THEY KEP' UP THEIR HOMES.

NOW THE BLACK MAN GOT HIS FREEDOM. THE WHITE MAN TRIED TO HELP 'IM. LOOK AT ME, I WAS IN THE NAACP AN' THEY PUSHED ME OFF TH' SIDEWALK. THE BLACK MAN IS BORN STUPID AN' LAZY. HE WANTS T'GIT BY BY STEALIN' AN' GETTIN' ON WELFARE. THE BLACK MAN IS JEALOUS OF THE WHITE MAN. HE WANTS WHAT TH' WHITE MAN GOT BUT HE DON'T WANNA WORK FOR IT. THE BLACK MAN IS RACIST, SO THE WHITE MAN GOTTA BE RACIST TOO.

IT WAS CRAZY, Y'KNOW. HERE WAS EMIL, LIV-IN' IN HATRED AND FEAR OF BLACKS. SO HE MOVES AWAY FROM HOUGH. BUT WHERE DOES HE MOVE TO— MY NEIGHBORHOOD, WHICH IS ALSO DANGEROUS, ALTHOUGH LESS SO THAN HOUGH, AND IN WHICH WHITE PEOPLE, ESPECIALLY OLDER WHITES, ARE LOOKED AT AS TARGETS BY SOME BLACK KIDS.

WHY HE DIDN'T MOVE T'SOME ALL WHITE NEIGHBORHOOD I DON'T KNOW. MAYBE HE DIDN'T EITHER. I OFTEN THOUGHT ABOUT SAYIN', "IF BLACKS UPSET YOU SO MUCH, WHY DON'T YOU GET AWAY FROM THEM COM-PLETELY?" BUT I NEVER ASKED HIM THAT, EVEN THOUGH I WONDERED ABOUT IT. I'M NOT SURE WHY I DIDN'T ASK HIM. MAYBE I THOUGHT ANSWERIN' MY QUESTION WOULD EMBARRASS HIM IN SOME WAY, GET HIM TO ADMIT SOMETHING ABOUT HIMSELF HE DIDN'T WANT TO ADMIT.
4.

YEAH, EMIL WAS A WEIRD GUY, A RECLUSE. HE DIDN'T SEEM T'WANT T' HAVE ANY CLOSE FRIENDS. SOMETIMES HE WENT OUT OF HIS WAY TO AVOID PEOPLE.
I REMEMBER ONE INCIDENT IN PARTICULAR.
HEY, HARVEY, THERE'S THIS GUY NAMED BILL NAGY IN MY SHOP THAT MIGHT COME OUT T'VISIT ME. I DON'T WANNA HAVE NOTHING T'DO WITH HIM. HE'S A DRUNK.
I'M MOVIN' ALL MY STUFF IN THE BACK ROOM FOR AWHILE AN' I'M GONNA PULL DOWN MY SHADES. IF HE COMES AROUND HERE AN' ASKS ABOUT ME TELL 'IM YOU AIN'T SEEN ME.
SO THAT'S WHAT EMIL DID. HE SHUT UP HIS HOUSE, MOVED ALL HIS STUFF INTA HIS BEDROOM AN' WOULDN'T ANSWER THE DOOR FOR A FEW WEEKS.
KNOCK KNOCK
YEAH, HE WAS A REAL LONER. LIKE A LOTTA GUYS WHO AREN'T INTA TOO MUCH, HE WAS A FANATIC SPORTS FAN. HE USETA GO TO FOOTBALL AN' BASEBALL GAMES BY HIMSELF AN' IF THE BROWNS OR INDIANS DID LOUSY HE'D GET REAL UPSET.
HOW'D THE GAME GO?
AH, THEY BLEW IT IN THE LAST INNING. WHAT A BUNCHA BUMS, A BUNCHA CHOKERS.
5.

ONE THING HE REALLY GOT INTO WAS WEIGHTLIFTING. BEING A SLAV HIMSELF, HE REALLY GOT OFF ON THE FEATS OF THE WORLD CHAMPION RUSSIAN WEIGHTLIFTERS. HE IDENTIFIED WITH THEM THE WAY A BLACK KID MIGHT IDENTIFY WITH MUHAMMAD ALI.

YEAH, THAT ZHABOTINSKY IS GREAT, THE STRONGEST MAN IN THE WORLD.

HE LIFTED WEIGHTS HIMSELF. HE'D STARTED WHEN HE WAS ABOUT THIRTY-FIVE. EVEN THOUGH HE WAS A PRETTY OLD GUY, HE HAD A MACHO ATTITUDE ABOUT HIS HEALTH AND STRENGTH. I REMEMBER ONE TIME HE GOT REAL UPTIGHT ABOUT A HERNIA OPERATION HE HADDA HAVE.

HAVIN' A HERNIA AIN'T NUTHIN', IS IT? IT DON'T MEAN YER WEAK, DOES IT?

NAH, DON' WORRY ABOUT IT, EMIL A LOTTA PEOPLE HAVE 'EM. IT'S NOTHING.

BECAUSE THE CATHOLIC AUSTRIANS HAD PERSECUTED HIS ORTHODOX RELATIVES, EMIL WAS NOT ONLY ANTI-BLACK BUT ANTI-CATHOLIC.

WHAT IZZAT JAPANESE RELIGION, SHINDOO OR SUMP'N?

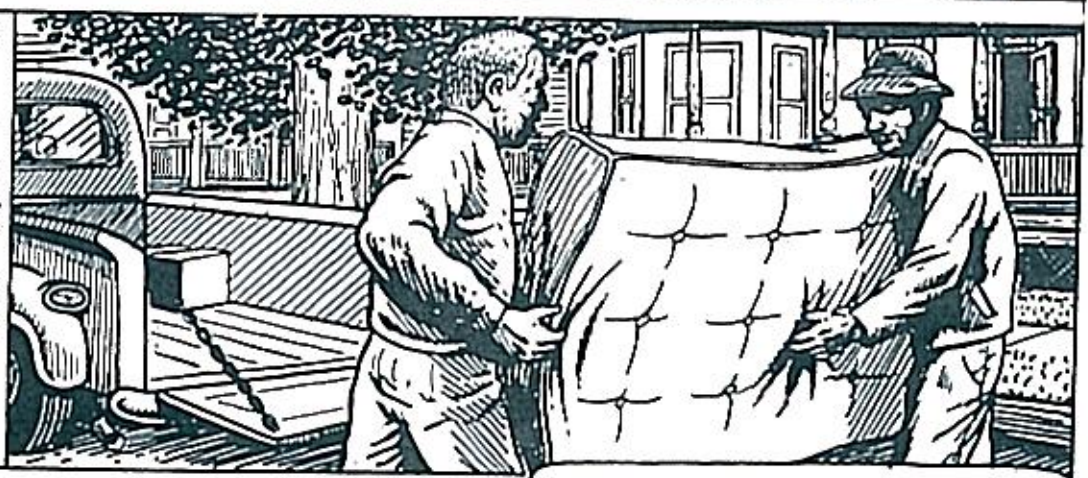
SHINTO, EMIL.

YEAH, WELL IT'S LIKE TH' CAT'LIKS - IT'S A FASCIST RELIGION. THE CAT'LIKS WORSHIP ONE MAN, THE POPE A' ROME. YEAH, CAT'LIKS AN' SHINDOO, ITSA SAME. FASCISTS. YEAH.

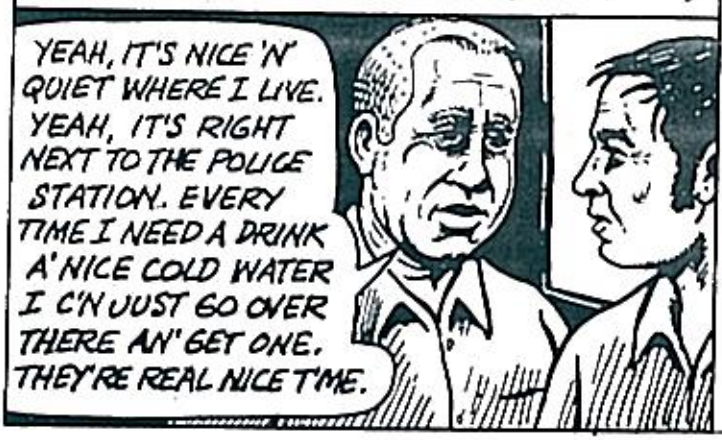
6

AS TIME WENT ON RACIAL CONFLICT IN CLEVELAND GOT HEAVIER AND HEAVIER. THERE WERE RIOTS WITH LOOTING AND BURNING. THE NATIONAL GUARD WAS STATIONED IN OUR NEIGHBORHOOD A COUPLE OF TIMES.

IT GOT TO BE TOO MUCH FOR EMIL. HE MOVED. STRANGELY ENOUGH, THE GUY WHO HELPED HIM WAS A BLACK GUY WHO WORKED WITH HIM.



I SAW HIM A COUPLE OF TIMES AFTER THAT. HE SEEMED TO BE PRETTY HAPPY LIVING WHERE HE WAS, EVEN THOUGH IT WAS IN A BASEMENT AND PRETTY SPARSELY FURNISHED.



IRONICALLY, EMIL HAD MOVED INTO A POOR NEIGHBORHOOD THAT WAS INTEGRATED BUT WOULD SOON BECOME ALL BLACK. HOW HE HANDLED THAT, WHETHER OR HOW SOON HE MOVED, I DON'T KNOW. I HAVEN'T SEEN HIM FOR YEARS. WONDER WHAT'S HAPPENED TO 'IM. HE USETA TALK ABOUT MOVIN' TO EL PASO WHEN HE RETIRED. MAYBE HES THERE.

-END-