

SPECIAL ON THE JEWS

“This is disgusting. Woody - shouldn't you be in your room with your homework?”

“Now, Hon. Let the boy watch if he wants. This is history. There's a lesson to be learned. This is why we fought the War.”

“It's OK, Mom. I finished it all this afternoon on my paper route.”

She blurted, how could I do homework like *that*?

“Easy. Just had a French dialogue to get by heart. Memorized it while walking between houses.”

“Oh...”

We fell silent as jackbooted stormtroopers goosestepped across the tube. In overvoice, Walter Cronkite explained the German people knew almost nothing of the camps; despite the involvement of some of their country's largest corporations. They had been told the Jews were simply being relocated. The Jews were told the same. Until the gas gushed out, and there was no longer anybody left alive to hear.

German civilians appeared - hard at work in good clean factories. Housewives cooked strudel over immaculate stoves, while listening to floor-model radios. Other housewives smiled while ironing, sewing or changing diapers - similar radios in the background.

My own German heritage came to mind. Meager, really. My grandfather - Mom's dad - emigrated when he was eighteen. He died of cancer before I was born. Mom sometimes wondered aloud if maybe the twelve hour shifts he worked all his life at the boiler plant didn't have something to do with the cancer. He had

little schooling. Raised on a farm somewhere in Germany Mom could never remember. Was largely self-educated. German - his native tongue. Of which Mom never learned a word. Granma was second generation Scotch-Irish. Mom, as she herself put it, had been raised American.

Grandpop Schmidt's field glasses currently constituted the most powerful instrument in my arsenal. Mom called them binoculars, but they weren't. The objectives lay in direct lines with the eyepieces. Meaning the device contained no prisms; was thus inferior to what is technically known as *binoculars*.

"And yet the fact remains," Cronkite asseverated, as Auschwitz flipped back onto the screen, "that virtually in their own backyards staggering numbers of Jews, Gypsies and Slavs were being, on a daily basis, ruthlessly slaughtered."

I thought of the 1864 Indianhead penny I'd sold to Johnny for five bucks. It was from Great-Grandpop Shelton, who had died when Dad was a teenager. It was an heirloom. I wasn't supposed to sell it. Up my spine travelled a tingle. Hoped nobody'd find out.

Grainy film showed losers in striped pyjamas stacking flat naked corpses.

On the Indianhead I'd managed to inflate somewhat the value. Coin book listed it as four-fifty. I'd harped on the legibility of the word "LIBERTY" in the Indian's headband. Elevating the coin to virtually mint condition. Worth at least another 75 cents. I let it go for only the extra half dollar because I was in a hurry to liquidate.

Johnny must've told Jack. Because later in French class, right before the bell rang, Jack yelled across class at me, "Hey, Jew!" And when he got my attention, he sneered, "Heard you made

another five today, *Jew!*”

Who *were* the Jews? What - were they all skinny? Are all skinny people Jewish? I'm kinda on the slim side myself.

Well, no. I knew a Jewish kid once. Bobby, who lived down the street a few years back, till his dad transferred to Fort Lewis - over on the other end of the Continent. Bobby was a chunky kid a year older than me. He looked like anybody else. Except he was Jewish, and that made him, well... different. His nose wasn't perfect. And of course some of these people...

The film cut to a parade of wafer corpses being piled beside ovens...

...had been fat or medium fat or medium. Before the War. Before Germany went what you might call legally insane. And all Jack meant by Jew - pulling his nose and jeering - was my determination to do anything to scrape together enough dough to buy the telescope. I wouldn't go so far as to say I was letting the ends justify the means, but...

“This is horrible,” Mom muttered. “How on God's earth could anybody have done this?”

I guess that's what Jack meant. Or did he really think I was... *was* I...?

“This is why we fought the War, Hon. We had to put a stop to it.”

OK... I was at least a quarter German. Plus, also from what Mom reported (Granny Schmidt died in a rest home when I was a baby), at least one quarter Scotch-Irish. Dad, the oldest of twelve kids raised in the Philly slums, knew little about his own roots. He always said he was told the family was English with maybe some German or Polish. Most Jews seemed to come from Germany or Poland. Did Jack know something I didn't -

another item my parents hadn't yet seen fit to reveal, or weren't themselves fully aware of?

I *do* have a rather large nose...

And it wasn't just that loudmouth prick Jack. Since the onset of the telescope campaign, over the past couple months, several other of the guys had begun to call me Jew.

"*You can trust your car to / The man who wears the star!*" the television sang.

"My God," Dad sighed. "Another stinking ad. The most disgusting invention of modern civilization has got to be the singing commercial!"

"I'm going upstairs." Mom got to her feet. Turned her wrinkled face on me: "Are you sure you want to see the rest of this?"

Dad frowned. Picked a cigarette out of the pack in his shirt pocket. Stuck the pill between his lips. Lit it.

"*The big, bright TEXACO star!*"

A handsomely-uniformed man with applepie teeth held forth the nozzle from a gasoline pump. Smiled wholesomely.

Without taking my eyes off the commercial, I reiterated it was OK, the homework was under control. (A joke: I did my homework religiously. Got good grades because I liked to study, to read, to know, to get to the *bottom* of things. But Mom had tried to leverage me from the tv on the homework issue - I was flipping it right back in her face).

"Well, if you're sure..." she hesitated. Then left the den, muttering maybe she'd do a little extra cleaning in the kitchen. Trudged up the carpeted stairs to the floor above.

For a splitsecond the screen went blank. Then, from a balcony, Hitler was haranguing the multitudes. Incomprehensible German

scratched and barked like a knife and fork cutting steak on a melmac plate. Cronkite narrated: "While Nazi armies rampaged over the map of Europe, hundreds of thousands of Jews were deported from the occupied countries. They were rounded up, crowded into boxcars and routed directly to the death camps. To this day it is unclear exactly how much cooperation was received from the civilian authorities of such nations as France, Holland, Belgium, Yugoslavia, Greece and the western republics of the Soviet Union.

"Gosh," I heard myself mumble, "why does *everybody* hate the Jews?" Then mentally hit myself - this was something you thought, but didn't *say*.

Dad exhaled smoke. I distinctly heard Hitler, on the twenty year old film, say: "Ich habe...!"

Thanks to a library book, I had been teaching myself German on the side. *Ich habe* meant "I have." The rest of Hitler's shrieking and growling was lost on me.

"Not everybody, Son. Your mother and I don't hate them. You'll remember Captain Warshall and his family who lived down the street. During the two years they were stationed in the area, they never caused a problem. I believe you and his son Bobby even played together a few times. Sure - your mother and I both grew up poor in Philadelphia, where many of the Jews were better off than we were. But only people who are sick in the head do all this hating that is fundamentally *irrational*."

Anger seemed to be creeping into Dad's voice. "Oh. I see." Best let it go. Dad had a temper. Mom said it was his job made him edgy. He boiled over quick, when things didn't make sense.

At the front, knee deep in mud, a helmeted Nazi raised to his eyes a pair of... I squinted at the screen... yes: field glasses.

The advertized cost of the telescope, shipping and handling included, was \$200. The sale of the Indianhead boosted me over the hundred dollar mark.

With the scope - a six-inch Newtonian reflector - I could observe the rings of Saturn, Jupiter's red spot, the Martian polar caps; hunt galaxies and nebulas like the Lagoon in Sagittarius, the Smoke Ring in Lyra, the Whirlpool near the handle of the Big Dipper. Jewels I'd only read of, whose photographic plates I'd drooled over. All just \$95 distant.

At the end of the month I'd collect a cool twenty-five clams off my paper route. Maybe sell my old Washington Senators baseball cap; now they'd moved to Minnesota, tout it as an antique - slap an extra buck on top.

Back at Auschwitz, they were ripping off the Jews' clothing, tattooing on their shoulders numbers. This *was* a bit sickening.

"Dad," I averted my gaze from the Motorola, "did Captain Warshall make a lot of money?"

"He was in the Army, Son." He at once grinned and frowned at the tube. "*You'll never get rich by diggin' a ditch!*"

Inside my head rang the rest of the jingle: *You're in the Army now / You're not behind the plow...* I mumbled, "Did he make more than you?" Aware I was on shaky ground - adults don't like money talk.

"Oh, no," he smoked. "As a GS 11 Civilian Employee, I make almost as much as a full Colonel. Now let's watch the show, Son."

Hollow-eyed guys in striped pyjamas were being lined up in front of a ditch. The squad shouldered arms. Aimed.

Into the den drifted a familiar smell. Acrid, sweet, greasy, clean. Smoke issued from the rifles. Like tenpins, into the ditch collapsed Jews.

If I had Polish blood... silvery taste... not Polish - *polish*. Mom was upstairs polishing the silverware! The smell - from pink goop used to make the silver shine. *Schein* is German for "shine" - pronounced the same.

Had the sight of all these dead Jews brought out Mom's German blood? She was up there making the silver - the essence of money - pure and shiny. Purging it of any the least suggestion of Jewishness. Was I secretly a Jew, and was Mom afraid...?

"Dad," I blurted, "was Grandpop Schmidt an Axis sympathizer?"

"Don't be ridiculous!" Into the beanbag ashtray on the floor beside the easy chair he stubbed out his butt. "Your mother's father came over to this country well before World War I. He was an American. Like me, he didn't fight in the Second World War - he was too old, I have my bad eyes. But we both contributed to the war effort. I drudged as an entry-level clerk at the Pentagon. Grandpop Schmidt worked even more overtime than usual at that boiler plant up in Philly - making a small fortune in time-and-a-half, I might add... whatever gave you the idea...? Ah, nuts - another damn *ad!*"

He glared down at his shirt pocket. Breathed heavily, impatiently - fighting the battle against lighting another cigarette.

"You can trust your car to / The man who wears the star!"

"We just saw this one!" He yanked up a filter-tip. Popped it into his mouth. Flipped open his lighter. Poised a thumb over the tiny wheel. "Dammit - why must they beat us over the head with this *crap!*"

The *butter* knife - that's what had been lurking in the back of my mind: Grandpop's butter knife! Bet I could sell it to some shop or one of the guys at school for a good \$25! Maybe Mom

was polishing it this instant, increasing the value as she rubbed. Although just a silver plate utensil, the handle was stamped with the effigy of Kaiser Wilhelm. Grandpop brought it over on the boat. Mom claimed he insisted it always appear at his setting on the table. Grandpop worshipped the Kaiser.

But I guess, after what Dad just said, it didn't mean anything. Just a quirk. Or if he was Jewish, or part Jewish, maybe that's how he hid it: with feigned loyalty to the presumably Aryan Kaiser.

"Fill your tank with TEXACO!"

Mom pronounced it *Wilhelm*. *Vilhelm* is correct. But I never pointed it out. Being almost thirteen, I knew when bringing up such details was worthless. Especially with folks like Mom, who failed to complete high school, due to the Great Depression; which didn't officially end till December 7th, 1941; war sometimes good for economy.

Over the flint Dad scritch'd the wheel. Sparked fluid and scorched tobacco clashed with silver polish aroma.

OK - approach an antique store first. Hope to leave the guys out of it. If Jack found out, he'd yell *Jew* so loud... would violence erupt, me get slugged? Jeez, all I wanted was to find out more about the universe. I'm not the violent type...

The show returned. "We shall never know," Cronkite intoned, "the precise number of those who perished at the hands of their Nazi butchers. The figure given so often of six million slain can be no more than an estimate."

Across the screen, assisted by American GI's, skeletons limped from a liberated camp. The camera panned over emaciated corpses littering a barbed wire perimeter. Close-up'd on hollow cheek, bug eye, slack jaw, toothpick neck. Pelvises, ribs, thighbones - visible in stark detail through the skin of the dead.

Stacks and stacks of murdered wafers. Slumped against a wall, a swollen skull on a sack of bones - gasping; a fly crawling the orbit of a lidded eye.

Jude is German for Jew. Was the word once in English pronounced Yew, You and Ewe?

Dad smoked. Cronkite kept quiet. The camera rolled and rolled.

I couldn't pull away my eyes. Each corpse, each wafer, each breathing skeleton pleaded for them to stare. A chill swept over my own skin. I felt Mom's bony hand scrub the soaked rag over the heirloom, as though the butter knife were the crazy bone at the tip of my elbow. Another second of such silence, and I would burst like a meteor striking Earth's atmosphere.

I cleared my throat to say something, anything. Heard myself babble: "If we fought the War because they were killing the Jews, how come we didn't discover they were killing the Jews till *after* the War?"

Dad grunted; obviously also hypnotized by the horror inside the tube. "Europeans have a problem, Son. Too many people. Too much history. Too much hate. Not enough *logic*."

"Is... greed also, uh, a factor?"

A starved inmate - beyond revival - appeared to die on camera.

"Yes, Son."

The show ended in silence.

The screen blanked. Then thrust us into a jingle about gasoline.