

When he was a boy, Morris Lieberman saw a burly Russian peasant seize a wagon
5 wheel that was lying against the side of a blacksmith's shop, swing it around, and hurl
it at a fleeing Jewish sexton. The wheel caught the Jew in the back, crushing his spine.
In speechless terror, he lay on the ground before his burning house, waiting to die.

Thirty years later Morris, a widower who owned a small grocery and delicatessen
store in a Scandinavian neighborhood in Brooklyn, could recall the scene of the
10 pogrom with the twisting fright that he had felt at fifteen. He often experienced the
same fear since the Nazis had come to power.

The reports of their persecution of the Jews that he heard over the radio filled him
with dread, but he never stopped listening to them. His fourteen-year-old son,
Leonard, a thin, studious boy, saw how overwrought his father became and tried to
15 shut off the radio, but the grocer would not allow him to. He listened, and at night did
not sleep, because in listening he shared the woes inflicted upon his race.

When the war began, Morris placed his hope for the salvation of the Jews in his trust
of the French army. He lived close to his radio, listening to the bulletins and praying
for a French victory in the conflict which he called "this righteous war."

On the May day in 1940 when the Germans ripped open the French lines at Sedan,
his long-growing anxiety became intolerable. Between waiting on customers, or
when he was preparing salads in the kitchen at the rear of the store, he switched on
the radio and heard, with increasing dismay, the flood of reports which never seemed
to contain any good news. The Belgians surrendered. The British retreated at
25 Dunkerque, and in mid-June, the Nazis, speeding toward Paris in their lorries, were
passing large herds of conquered Frenchmen resting in the fields.

Day after day, as the battle progressed, Morris sat on the edge of the cot in the
kitchen listening to the additions to his sorrow, nodding his head the way the Jews do
in mourning, then rousing himself to hope for the miracle that would save the French
30 as it had saved the Jews in the wilderness. At three o'clock, he shut off the radio,
because Leonard came home from school about then. The boy, seeing the harmful
effect of the war on his father's health, had begun to plead with him not to listen to so
many news broadcasts, and Morris pacified him by pretending that he no longer
thought of the war. Each afternoon Leonard remained behind the counter while his
35 father slept on the cot. From the dream-filled, raw sleep of these afternoons, the

grocer managed to derive enough strength to endure the long day and his own bitter thoughts.

5 The salesmen from the wholesale grocery houses and the drivers who served Morris were amazed at the way he suffered. They told him that the war had nothing to do with America and that he was taking it too seriously. Some of the others made him the object of their ridicule outside the store. One of them, Gus Wagner, who delivered the delicatessen meats and provisions, was not afraid to laugh at Morris to his face.

10 Gus was a heavy man, with a strong, full head and a fleshy face. Although born in America, and a member of the AEF in 1918, his imagination was fired by the Nazi conquests and he believed that they had the strength and power to conquer the world. He kept a scrapbook filled with clippings and pictures of the German army. He was deeply impressed by the Panzer divisions, and when he read accounts of battles in which they tore through the enemy's lines, his mind glowed with excitement. He did not reveal his feelings directly because he considered his business first. As it was, he
15 poked fun at the grocer for wanting the French to win.

Each afternoon, with his basket of liverwursts and bolognas on his arm, Gus strode into the store and swung the basket onto the table in the kitchen. The grocer as usual was sitting on the cot, listening to the radio.

20 "Hello, Morris," Gus said, pretending surprise. "What does it say on the radio?" He sat down heavily and laughed.

When things were going especially well for the Germans, Gus dropped his attitude of pretense and said openly, "You better get used to it, Morris. The Germans will wipe out the Frenchmen."

25 Morris disliked these remarks, but he said nothing. He allowed Gus to talk as he did because he had known the meat man for nine years. Once they had nearly been friends. After the death of Morris's wife four years ago, Gus stayed longer than usual and joined Morris in a cup of coffee. Occasionally he repaired a hole in the screen door or fixed the plug for the electric slicing machine.

30 Leonard had driven them apart. The boy disliked the meat man and always tried to avoid him. He was nauseated by Gus's laughter, which he called a cackle, and he would not allow his father to do business with Gus in the kitchen when he was having his milk and crackers after school.

Gus knew how the boy felt about him and he was deeply annoyed. He was angered too when the boy added up the figures on the meat bills and found errors. Gus was
35 careless in arithmetic, which often caused trouble. Once Morris mentioned a five-

dollar prize that Leonard had won in mathematics and Gus said, "You better watch out, Morris. He's a skinny kid. If he studies too much, he'll get consumption."

5 Morris was frightened. He felt that Gus was wishing harm upon Leonard. Their relations became cooler, and after that Gus spoke more freely about politics and the war, often expressing his contempt for the French.

10 The Germans took Paris and pushed on toward the west and south. Morris, drained of his energy, prayed that the ordeal would soon be over. Then the Reynaud cabinet fell. Marshal Pétain addressed a request to the Germans for "peace with honor." In the dark Compiègne forest, Hitler sat in Marshal Foch's railroad car, listening to his terms being read to the French delegation.

15 That night, after closing his store, Morris disconnected the radio and carried it upstairs. In his bedroom, the door shut tightly so Leonard would not be awakened, he tuned in softly to the midnight broadcast and learned that the French had accepted Hitler's terms and would sign the armistice tomorrow. Morris shut off the radio. An age-old weariness filled him. He wanted to sleep but he knew that he could not.

Morris turned out the lights, removed his shirt and shoes in the dark, and sat smoking in the large bedroom that had once belonged to him and his wife.

20 The door opened softly, and Leonard looked into the room. By the light of the street lamp which shone through the window, the boy could see his father in the chair. It made him think of the time when his mother was in the hospital and his father sat in the chair all night.

Leonard entered the bedroom in his bare feet. "Pa," he said, putting his arm around his father's shoulders, "go to sleep."

"I can't sleep, Leonard."

25 "Pa, you got to. You work sixteen hours."

"Oh, my son," cried Morris, with sudden emotion, putting his arms around Leonard, "what will become of us?"

The boy became afraid.

"Pa," he said, "go to sleep. Please, you got to."

“All right, I’ll go,” said Morris. He crushed his cigarette in the ashtray and got into bed. The boy watched him until he turned over on his right side, which was the side he slept on; then he returned to his room.

Later Morris rose and sat by the window, looking into the street. The night was cool.
5 The breeze swayed the street lamp, which creaked and moved the circle of light that fell upon the street.

“What will become of us?” he muttered to himself. His mind went back to the days when he was a boy studying Jewish history. The Jews lived in an interminable exodus. Long lines trudged forever with their bundles on their shoulders.

10 He dozed and dreamed that he had fled from Germany into France. The Nazis had found out where he lived in Paris. He sat in a chair in a dark room waiting for them to come. His hair had grown grayer. The moonlight fell on his sloping shoulders, then moved into the darkness. He rose and climbed out onto a ledge overlooking the lighted city of Paris. He fell. Something clumped to the sidewalk. Morris groaned and
15 awoke. He heard the purring of a truck’s motor and he knew that the driver was dropping the bundles of morning newspapers in front of the stationery store on the corner.

The dark was soft with gray. Morris crawled into bed and began to dream again. It was Sunday at suppertime. The store was crowded with customers. Suddenly Gus
20 was there. He waved a copy of Social Justice and cried out, “The Protocols of Zion! The Protocols of Zion!” The customers began to leave. “Gus,” Morris pleaded, “the customers, the customers—”

He awoke shivering and lay awake until the alarm rang.

After he had dragged in the bread and milk boxes and had waited on the deaf man
25 who always came early, Morris went to the corner for a paper. The armistice was signed. Morris looked around to see if the street had changed, but everything was the same, though he could hardly understand why. Leonard came down for his coffee and roll. He took fifty cents from the till and left for school.

The day was warm and Morris was tired. He grew uneasy when he thought of Gus.
30 He knew that today he would have difficulty controlling himself if Gus made some of his remarks.

At three o’clock, when Morris was slicing small potatoes for potato salad, Gus strode into the store and swung his basket onto the table.

“Well, Morris”—he laughed—“why don’t you turn the radio on? Let’s hear the news.”

Morris tried to control himself, but his bitterness overcame him. “I see you’re happy today, Gus. What great cause has died?”

5 The meat man laughed, but he did not like that remark.

“Come on, Morris,” he said, “let’s do business before your skinny kid comes home and wants the bill signed by a certified public accountant.”

“He looks out for my interests,” answered Morris. “He’s a good mathematics student,” he added.

10 “That’s the sixth time I heard that,” said Gus.

“You’ll never hear it about your children.”

Gus lost his temper. “What the hell’s the matter with you Jews?” he asked. “Do you think you own all the brains in the world?”

“Gus,” Morris cried, “you talk like a Nazi.”

15 “I’m a hundred percent American. I fought in the war,” answered Gus.

Leonard came into the store and heard the loud voices. He ran into the kitchen and saw the two men arguing. A feeling of shame and nausea overcame him.

“Pa,” he begged, “don’t fight.”

20 Morris was still angry. “If you’re not a Nazi,” he said to Gus, “why are you so glad the French lost?”

“Who’s glad?” asked Gus. Suddenly he felt proud and he said, “They deserved to lose, the way they starved the German people. Why the hell do you want them to win?”

“Pa,” said Leonard again.

“I want them to win because they are fighting for democracy.”

25 “Like hell,” said Gus. “You want them to win because they’re protecting the Jews—like that lousy Léon Blum.”

“You Nazi, you,” Morris shouted angrily, coming from behind the table. “You Nazi! You don’t deserve to live in America!”

“Papa,” cried Leonard, holding him, “don’t fight, please, please.”

“Mind your own business, you little bastard,” said Gus, pushing Leonard away.

5 A sob broke from Leonard’s throat. He began to cry.

Gus paused, seeing that he had gone too far.

Morris Lieberman’s face was white. He put his arm around the boy and kissed him again and again.

“No, no. No more, Leonard. Don’t cry. I’m sorry. I give you my word. No more.”

10 Gus looked on without speaking. His face was still red with anger, but he was afraid that he would lose Morris’s business. He pulled two liverwursts and a bologna from his basket.

“The meat’s on the table,” he said. “Pay me tomorrow.”

15 Gus glanced contemptuously at the grocer comforting his son, who was quiet now, and he walked out of the store. He threw the basket into his truck, got in, and drove off.

As he rode amid the cars on the avenue, he thought of the boy crying and his father holding him. It was always like that with the Jews. Tears and people holding each other. Why feel sorry for them?

20 Gus sat up straight at the wheel, his face grim. He thought of the armistice and imagined that he was in Paris. His truck was a massive tank rumbling with the others through the wide boulevards. The French, on the sidewalks, were overpowered with fear.

25 He drove tensely, his eyes unsmiling. He knew that if he relaxed the picture would fade.