Chapter 2
A Kid’s War II: The Real Thing
1941–1945

On the afternoon of December 7, 1941, I was listening to the Eagles-Redskins football game broadcast from Griffith Stadium in Washington, D.C., when the action, on the air, was broken into by the news flash about Pearl Harbor. We were visiting family, gathering nearly every Sunday at one or another uncle’s house in the towns just below Philadelphia—Chester, Linwood, and Marcus Hook—or in Arden, just below the Pennsylvania line. Chester was burgeoning into a wartime boomtown as Sun Shipbuilding, along the Delaware, moved to three shifts to help keep the British at least even with the numbers of freighters and tankers being sunk by German subs. Marcus Hook was also flourishing, as the refineries that surrounded it and gave the town its nose-puckering perfume, had also turned to round-the-clock production, and the sky was bright with smoke and steam and flame from towering burn-off vents.

At first the radio offered little real news other than repetitions of the bald announcement. Uncle Jack, a veteran of the last war, and France, twisted the dial to find out more, but all the stations had the same bulletin. Hawaii and the Philippines had been attacked. (It turned out that the report about the Philippines was premature.) According to CBS military expert George Fielding Eliot, hastily brought in, the Japanese must have attacked Pearl Harbor riskily from offshore aircraft carriers, and undoubtedly their losses in warships would be heavy once we located them with our big bombers. (Unready and asleep, our military never located the enemy fleet, and most bombers were blasted as they sat on the ground.)

We felt uneasy at not being under our own roofs at such a moment. Families began leaving for home earlier than usual, yet it was already
dark in approaching winter when we stopped at a traffic light in Chester near a busy hamburger drive-in where waitresses would—although not this time for us—clip trays to open car windows. As the signal changed to red, and my father braked, a boy waiting in the glare of the Hires Root Beer sign dashed out to press the first extras of the Philadelphia Record on motorists. Sales were brisk. Dad reached out for one. The top half of the distinctive pinkish early edition front page was covered by one huge word: “WAR!”

The first weeks were a blur of disconcerting headlines. We were losing everywhere. Soon I went on a new spate of collecting bubble-gum cards, this time about our own war, once the cards appeared in the early months of 1942. Although I accumulated a lot of them, my heart wasn’t in it. Hastily turned out, the new cards were intended to make the blood quicken, yet the propagandistic patriotism was at variance with the gloomy newspaper reports. We were winning—sort of—the bubble-gum war but not the actual one. All we had to do was to compare press dispatches, however censored, to the effusive card captions. “Dying Captain Carries On” misplaced an episode about the battleship West Virginia at Pearl Harbor on the exploding Arizona, where it would have been impossible. “Malayans Check Jap Landing”—which never was checked—appeared after Malaya was overrun. “Dutch Kill Sky Troops at Sumatra” invented more parachutists than the Japanese possessed—and, besides, Sumatra fell easily. A portrait of Aussie general Gordon Bennett, who bailed out of Singapore and left his soldiers to surrender abjectly after he was safely—and scandalously—back home, featured a fiction of heavy combat and “a curtain of steel and flame” protecting the island. It was nonsense, as was Bennett’s quoted vow: “My men are going in with their chins up.”

Card #1 in the new series featured a stern General Douglas MacArthur, whose heroism and leadership qualities in the Philippines proved fanciful—but fiction seemed necessary to keep chins up on the American home front. In line with his communiqués, weak exchanges of fire on Luzon were elevated into dramatic battles, and “Daring Sub Saves Corregidor’s Gold” made the ingots seem more significant than the fall of the last bastion on Luzon. “Navy Cripples Japs in Aleutians” magnified a minor shelling of barren Kiska while failing to identify the “enemy shore installations” as our shore. Captain Colin Kelly, featured as
going down with his B-17 off Luzon, never, as captioned, sank the battleship *Haruna*. It survived into 1945, when it was finally hit in home waters. Heroes, nevertheless, were needed. So were small victories.

“Tokyo Bombed!” was accurate enough, but Jimmy Doolittle’s gutsy fliers off the carrier *Hornet* in April created more domestic concern in Japan than real damage. (Yet the raid may have contributed inadvertently to spurring the Japanese misadventure in June at Midway.)

Our war then was largely in the Pacific, but some cards dramatized events, no more accurately, across the Atlantic. The largely Canadian landings at the Channel port of Dieppe were a catastrophe, yet bubble-gum cards boasted that Allied troops “in nine hours ... accomplished all their objectives and retired.” In truth the Canadians lost three-quarters of their men and attained none of their objectives. There was little anywhere about which to boast through much of 1942. Even “Hangman Heydrich Assassinated” (in Czechoslovakia) was an event which led to such ghastly and unpictured reprisals as the Nazi massacre at Lidice.

A curious comic-book war survives on the cards, the dream-vision of a gum-company’s cheerleaders. Whether the scenes were gruesome or glorious, the colors were always as bright as the outlook for victory. The enemy was always vicious and often cowardly, while our side was always brave and fought heroically. Yet as 1942 drew toward a close with tide-turning real victories happening, these were unreported by hard-pressed Gum, Inc. The company was running out of ingredients to keep flexible the chewable product that was the excuse for the cards. And now past thirteen, I was looking past the poster images.

Reaching thirteen had meant a rite of passage. Early in the year I had begun preparing for my *bar mitzvah*, which was scheduled for the Saturday morning after my birthday on Friday, April 17. The war news had been continually dispiriting, and getting worse. Bataan, an isolated thumb of Luzon, had surrendered the week before. A grim future loomed for the survivors. Only the fortress island of Corregidor in Manila Bay, from which MacArthur had left for Australia in early March, abandoning the Army nurses but not his personal staff, remained of an American presence on Luzon. To little resistance, the Japanese began mopping up the rest of the Philippines.
Leaving early on Saturday the eighteenth with my family to walk the few blocks to the bar mitzvah site, I had skipped the morning radio newscasts. As we proceeded along Porter Street I silently rehearsed my lines, for I was to conduct part of the morning service, chant a portion of the Torah to be read that day, and offer brief remarks in which I thanked my parents and asked for divine blessing for the nation and its leaders.

As I stood on the podium, waiting for the incoming audience buzz to diminish, it only increased as more congregants arrived. One of my cousins came forward. “Haven’t you heard?” he said. “We had our car radio on. Colonel Jimmy Doolittle’s fliers have bombed Tokyo!” My command of the ceremonies was shaky after that, but the ritual went on to its conclusion. I became an intrusive factor to listeners uneasily eager for more news about the daring feat eight thousand miles away. Americans had struck a dramatic surprise that would reverberate in the coming months, and the Doolittle raid would be remembered on a bubble-gum card.

Even more memorable to me that morning was the most precious birthday gift I would ever receive. Uncle Jack and Aunt Anna presented me with a portable Royal typewriter. Although I would never be more than a one-finger typist, it altered my life. Whether or not I had anything to say, scrolling a sheet of paper and tapping the keys set me on the path to writing. I could now produce what looked to me proudly like print.

There was little I could do as a kid in 1942 to get usefully involved in the war. Although I contributed to the school magazine, the Thomas Junior High Herald, the opportunities were small. For the April issue, still under the influence of bubble-gum histrionics, I employed my new typewriter to dramatize the epic siege and overwhelming of Wake Island in December 1941. Fortunately, the verses remain inconspicuous among my forgettable schoolboy verse and prose. I was no poet. Nor were my classmates. “Onward, MacArthur! We’ll never fail you,” wrote one of my classmates. In the December 1942 issue I would succumb to mawkish pathos and patriotism in a verse chronicle, “The Battle of Bataan,” eleven awful stanzas about “MacArthur’s outnumbered, half-starved band.” I had no idea, nor did anyone else then, that the general had visited Bataan only once, for about two hours. I wrote still another
pathetic ballad about a pilot managing heroically to fly his crippled plane back to safety on a carrier in the Pacific.

Although such attempts seemed a creative re-start to my abandoned war history, I spared literature that continuation. Yet before I closed the lid on the typewriter I chanced sending a verse effort on the war to the Philadelphia Inquirer. It was published on the editorial page, apparently because I put “Age 13” next to my name. Mom was proud. She clipped it to show about. No literary sleuth need find it.

In May 1942 our first ration books were issued. We each had our own, for food products like butter and meat. Its instructions also advised saving tin cans and “waste fats.” Change for ration coupons came in tiny blue and red dime-sized tokens, which were fun to collect and stack, and flip, until parents discovered that the missing tokens were depleting their food allowances. We had to give them up.

Real small change was still preferable, and I acquired some on my own. Under wartime regulations, kids could get certified for part-time work at fourteen. I wasn’t yet recruited for anything but odd and unreported jobs, but I managed the fifty-five cents for the Army War Show at Franklin Field in June 1942, which demonstrated the latest weapons (few proved much good) while raising funds for Army Emergency Relief. It was an effort to get civilians involved, and one of the last times that crowds enacted the Pledge of Allegiance with hands outstretched, palms up, toward the flag, as it embarrassingly paralleled the Hitlerite gesture, which differed only in palms down. The Flag Code salute was altered on June 22, and endorsed by Congress that December. After that we placed right hands over our hearts.

There were also patriotic parades in which to march, which cost nothing and made me feel part of the action. An identification tag that I saved confirms that I was in the Thomas Junior High contingent of
the Navy Day parade on October 25, 1942. Also, that autumn, to mark the anniversary of Pearl Harbor, I contributed further to the war effort, so I thought, by writing and directing the annual school play, an historical pageant I entitled, ambitiously, “The Spirit of America.” It was patriotic claptrap, concocted mostly from other people’s words and war songs old and new, with choruses and marching soldiers to give nearly everyone in the school, itself named for a Civil War general, a chance to perform, then to retire offstage so we would have an audience. On the nonmusical side I adapted for performance the final pages of Edward Everett Hale’s “The Man Without a Country,” guaranteeing, I was sure, a flood of heartfelt emotion about flag and nation. My friend Marty Sherman, who had what we thought was a broadcaster’s voice, was the radio-style narrator.

Backstage at the portable, organ-like melodeon for the musical interludes, pumping the pedals to dramatic effect, was Edwin Loper, our music teacher. Everything proceeded splendidly. I watched and directed self-importantly from behind the split curtains as each scene unwound and the participants returned to their seats for each new segment. But suddenly, during a thumping version of “Over There”—we had reached 1917—the melodeon, on a platform with wheels, sprang its brake and began rolling downstage. Intent on his music, Ed Loper hardly realized that he was in motion—backwards. After my sudden paralysis passed, I ran to intercept him, but I was too late. With Mr. Loper still seated helplessly, the melodeon part ed the curtains, scattering the World War I doughboys. The audience went wild with laughter. My patriotic pageant had become comic opera.

While the melodeon, and Mr. Loper, were pushed backstage, teachers patrolled the aisles, restoring order, to continue conducting the audience through our history. Then Marty began again, introducing the war in progress. A new chorus sang “Remember Pearl Harbor.” Then our final soloist came on. Eddie Fisher would become known later for crooning hit ballads and for marrying and unmarrying Hollywood beauties. (One was everyman’s domestic dream girl, another everyman’s dream temptress, still another everyman’s sexy pop canary). Backed by a chorus, Eddie belted out our finale, Frank Loesser’s “Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition” (“... and we’ll all stay free”), based upon a chaplain’s alleged exhortation at Pearl Harbor.
But the melodeon’s surprise attack on the chorus had broken whatever spell had existed. The extravaganza limped to its conclusion. “The Spirit of America” was my first and last production. My career in show business was over. Eddie Fisher’s had just begun.

The wartime draft had begun putting my friends’ big brothers, and a few younger fathers, into uniform. Banners with blue stars, some soon to be replaced by gold ones, began to appear in the front windows of our narrow redbrick row houses. Oscar, next door, was one of the first to go. Others followed quickly, and the banners multiplied. Our windows looked embarrassingly bare—but I was the oldest child.

Of two brothers I knew in the next block, Arnold left soon after. He was the studious one, from whom great things were expected. We knew Gus, the other brother, better because Sol, the Abbott’s Dairy milkman, let him guide Albert, the plodding milk-wagon horse, through the neighborhood. Gus was less than bright, too old for school but too dim for responsible work. He spoke hollowly and slowly, and was oversized and clumsy. Sometimes Gus also helped the iceman and carried blocks of ice in his wide tongs as if they were pillows.

One day, when the draft seemed to be taking nearly every male who was old enough, Gus went into khaki. We kids wondered what he could do in the Army, and how he could possibly help to win the war. When he came home on his first leave soon after basic training, a hulk of a soldier nearly bursting out of his uniform, we learned from his mother, who now had two blue stars in her window, that Gus did essential tasks at a training camp, like cleaning barracks latrines. He was freeing other soldiers for more specialized duties. She was pleased beyond any thoughts of patriotism. Gus would be learning things that would make him useful in peacetime, when trotting Albert surely would be replaced by a milk truck. Some months later we noticed a gold star and only one blue one in her window. Arnold had been killed in action, in a tank. But Gus was safe. He would come back. His unmechanical war would be fought with mops and buckets—and over here.

My big cousins all went into some kind of uniform—all but Leonard Segal, who had worked in an explosives factory until something blew up. He lost an eye and had only cloudy sight in the other. After plastic surgery to repair his face he was fitted with a primitive contact lens for his remaining eye, and the company found him a less demanding job.
The only cousin of military age not in uniform and not overseas, he would be the family’s lone war casualty.

Harold Segal had been the first cousin to be drafted. As each went off, I began sending them letters. Mail was appreciated, although what interest the contents could possibly have had now passes understanding. Still, when mail call came, they had something from home. Soon letters came back from war zones in reduced V-Mail fashion—miniaturized on microfilm and then expanded to readability on 4¾" x 3¾" forms—from places as far away as India, China, various unnamed Pacific islands, England, North Africa, and finally, after D-Day, France. After the war, when Ben Levering brought me a big silver Chinese coin he had picked up in Shanghai, I felt that my services to the armed forces had been validated.

Eugene, one of the boys in my eighth-grade class in 1942–1943, was about as tall as Gus and older than the rest of us, but not yet eligible to drop out of school and join up. He knew he was slow-witted—he had been held back twice—and when we had to present two-minute talks on what we wanted to become as adults, he was practical enough to temper his ambitions to his abilities. He wanted to be a lamplighter, he said, and walk the streets with his little ladder and bag of tools, and maintain the gas-lamps. Philadelphia had thousands of them.

Outwitting his parents, Eugene proved more clever than we thought. Claiming to Navy recruiters that he was seventeen, he furnished a permission form signed—he claimed—by his father, and enlisted. We were thrilled by his escape from school, and he never had to regret the loss of his dream job when the gas-lamps were phased out after the war. Eugene had long since lost his life when the first ship on which he sailed was torpedoed.

All of us would eventually go into uniform, our junior-high phys-ed teacher, the feisty, bantam-sized Sam Cozen predicted. Because the war would not self-destruct prematurely just to spare us, we had to learn the rudiments of military survival. As the Navy Yard was so close, just below the city dumps and League Island Park, most of us thought in terms of ships, but Mr. Cozen predicted that the only ship most draftees would experience would be a troopship. We had to learn the rope-climb, he warned, as that would be how we would disembark in an emergency at sea. (Some of us discovered that in reality, cargo nets
were lowered over the side for footholds—much easier to manage.) In the school gym we had to hoist ourselves to start, cling to a second rope, transfer at the top to a third, then lower ourselves hand-after-hand on a fourth—all without sliding down with burning palms or gripping the rope with our feet. I failed every time. “You’d better hope you won’t need this,” Mr. Cozen said, glaring at me.

Then he cautioned us in sex-segregated health education class—as teacher he was a double-threat—that the scourge of the services, at home and abroad, was venereal disease. He explained what V.D. was in such vividly horrific terms that boys would reach protectively for their groins. The sure prevention, he said, was to keep your zipper up. Sailors were particularly susceptible and were solicited in every port of call. Many of us laughed. That kind of activity was beyond all but two or three over-ripe or over-aged members of the class. Besides, all of us knew that sailors’ bell-bottoms had buttons rather than zippers. We lived near the Navy Yard.

Some girls in eighth and ninth grades risked sneaking down at dusk, sophisticated by contraband lipstick, to the gates at the Navy Yard where sailors were emerging with passes for an evening on the town. I recall one classmate, known to comb her hair after hours into a Veronica Lake facsimile, a long blonde lock covering nearly all of one eye, who jumped from a third-floor window at school attempting to abort her pregnancy. (It was too short a fall. She broke some bones, but the baby survived.) “Veronica” vanished from school after that, which made it easy for several self-described “fast” boys to claim fatherhood, boasts we took skeptically. Junior-high girls could get closer to the war, Eugene excepted, than boys.

Girls, but for those living close to us, then nearly vanished, as South Philadelphia High School for Boys was separated from the equal and adjacent girls’ school, sharing in the same grey structure only an interior fire-escape stairway. To be caught in it risked suspension. Walking to or from school with girls seldom happened. They were more interested in older boys who expected to be called up on graduation. Uniforms were sexy. Many boys hoped to pin on Air Corps wings. Few realized what the casualty rate already was for those who manned what could be flying coffins.
Abroad, the war in the air had intensified from 1942 into 1943 and beyond, and that aspect was reflected over my bed. My back bedroom upstairs, shared with Herb, reeked of airplane glue. Hanging from the ceiling were models which Herb and I assembled—a Flying Tiger P-40, a twin-boom Lockheed P-38, an R.A.F. Spitfire, a Japanese Zero, and a German Stuka dive bomber. The red Japanese “meatball” and the black Nazi crosses and swastikas suggested authenticity, evoking hostile remarks from Mom. I explained that it took two sides to fight a war, and that aircraft spotting required recognizing the visual characteristics of enemy planes. The skyful of aircraft made awakening at first light exciting, as the breeze from a window over the back alley nudged about the planes and their shadows.

At nearly a dollar, airplane models to construct were my most extravagant wartime expense, but also, despite lacking much coin in the early wartime years, I became a compulsive book-buyer. When I found work at fourteen, it was at forty cents an hour. Paperbacks cost a quarter. Used ones were even less. For twenty-five cents I purchased my first war novel early in 1943, when I was still thirteen. It was John Steinbeck’s *The Moon is Down* about the Nazi takeover of Norway. Resentful inhabitants in a village commit small acts of sabotage against the occupiers and finally manage to deprive the Germans of the local coal mine by blowing it up. One of the 119 pages in the small book included what was for me a memorable line from the wry village doctor: “The flies have conquered the flypaper.” It was hard to understand at first, but I got the point. Still, I wondered whether, in a reputedly cold country like Norway, one needed, or could find, flypaper.
Another paperback I bought was John Hersey’s uplifting *Men on Bataan*, which I accepted as a saga of ordinary soldiers who died bravely while being led—actually misled, I discovered years later—by the overpraised General MacArthur, who seemed to embody all the traditional American virtues. He was, the newspapers claimed, “the Man of Bataan.” Although I suspected what seemed unthinking applause, I did not know that my twenty-five cents had been wasted on claptrap until I began writing military histories, and that the general’s “incredible brilliance” in defending the besieged Bataan peninsula was a fiction.

Comic book heroes proved more authentic, and were available at only ten cents a copy. Superman never donned a uniform and went to war, as my father chided me, for I continued to seek the comics on visits to Uncle Lou. I pointed out to Dad that Superman, as Clark Kent, had tried to enlist but had failed the physical. Because of his X-Ray vision, he had read the wrong eye-chart—the one six cubicles down the corridor of examination rooms.

It was in the daily newspaper strips that the realities of war intruded. Joe Palooka was in training camp, as was Skeezix of “Gasoline Alley.” Even “Tillie the Toiler” enlisted. Manageable civilian inconveniences regularly turned up in the comic strips, which were seldom now comic. Rationing had not proved much of an inconvenience. I had long inherited my cousin Gene Mark’s outgrown clothes—and he was soon in the Air Corps anyway. I felt unduly conspicuous in green tweed, but no coupons were expended. Although it was contrary to regulations, accommodating grocers exchanged ration coupons for items we didn’t want or need for those we did. Somehow that balanced out among their clientele. For a surcharge, the garage attendant on Ninth Street sold my father the gas he needed for going to work as long as Dad turned over all his “B” coupons. So much remained unrationed that we hardly noticed scarcities. New shoes were a minor problem; my brother had to wear the ones I outgrew. Herb was used to hand-me-down clothes anyway, just as I got mine from Gene.

Most of my schoolmates were nearly a year older than I was, eligible for part-time work before me. At fourteen, my working papers filled out, after classes and on weekends I worked jobs vacated by draftees. One pal earned enough to buy his first clothes not discarded by his brother. Their family, on Hutchinson Street, parallel to ours, was ex-
tremely poor, living in a rental row house nearly empty of furniture. Sol's parents seemed elderly enough to be his grandparents—dowdy, reclusive Old Country immigrants without skills or outside jobs. One day in 1943 he came proudly to class in a zoot suit—then a fad largely sported by jive-talking, jitterbugging, Black teenagers and promoted by a popular song:

I wanna zoot suit
With a reet pleat,
And a drape shape....

His lengthy striped jacket had wide side vents and exaggeratedly padded shoulders. The waistband of his trousers began under the armpits, ballooning out below the waist and tapering at the cuffs. After teachers warned Sol not to wear such garb to school again, he “zooted” on social occasions, accessorized by an accompanying broad-brimmed black hat. Once he began to feel sheepish and lonely in the costume, he abandoned it. (To conserve fabric the War Production Board had already forbade its manufacture, but it had imbedded itself in wartime youth culture.)

Collecting—even scavenging—scrap metal was supposed to be crucial to the war effort. It was also fun, and we kids were efficient at collecting tinfoil and wadding it into weighty balls. Sometimes there were special bonuses for scrap. Early in the war I got into a football game—Michigan State at Temple—that way. It was a great game—a 7–7 tie—but the results were less great when I got home. Mom discovered that I had lugged a heavy copper pot to the stadium. Dusty and unused, it was a sort of family heirloom. Her family in Poland had been coppersmiths, and the “heavy scrap” I had lifted from the cellar had been brought from Europe in 1906. Since I was too old to spank, I was sent to my room without dinner, complaining all the while that the pot had sat next to the coalbin for years. I never found out how it got missed.

My Uncle Joe, who had not been trained in coppersmithing, but in woodcarving, now hammered planks at the Navy Yard. During the Depression years his shop had been languishing as a dusty wonderland of unfinished and unwanted gargoyles and cornices. Now he put down the decks of big new ships, as did thousands of other men displaced from peacetime employment—or unemployment—and too old for a uniform like the one Joe Segal’s son Harold already wore. The pride
of the fleet under construction was the battleship New Jersey. Too big to be a military secret, its superstructure loomed above the Yard. It could be seen from the Wilson Line boats still plying the Delaware and from the Passyunk Avenue drawbridge over the Schuylkill River, along which long tankers clustered at the Gulf and Atlantic refineries.

Since completion of the battleship was an occasion for self-congratulation, the launching became an event. It was a great moment when I received in my own name, courtesy of Uncle Joe, an invitation to the ceremonies, timed dramatically for December 7, 1942. I was there, card in one hand, roller skates in the other. On December 7, 1943 the battleship Wisconsin was launched, and again I had an invitation. Somehow the next anniversary of Pearl Harbor was ceremonially bypassed at the Navy Yard, but I was at the launching of the aircraft carrier Princeton on July 8, 1945, when the war was nearly over. Soon after that, Uncle Joe was laid off, along with other employees soon to be surplus in peacetime.

In the summer of 1944, I was just fifteen. Uncle Jack, who had a small but thriving department store in Marcus Hook, Mark’s, above the Delaware between the refineries, needed employee help. Except for an elderly and deaf salesman in the basement department—plumbing and paint—with a hearing aid that often screeched, and a beer-soaked and fiftyish pot-bellied clerk in the men’s department, the staff was female. The other former regulars were in war work or in uniform. Would I be a vacation replacement? I had come back often part-time, and would again. For several years earlier on each Thanksgiving Day I had been assigned the second-floor window above Mark’s, looking out on Post Road (10th Street), where the town pre-Christmas parade sponsored by Uncle Jack would halt while the hook-and-ladder fire truck on which Santa was riding raised its ladder. As the crowd cheered, Santa would climb up and into the window, then hurry down to the basement, turned into a toy shop, where, enthroned according to holiday tradition, he would greet small fry. Year following year Santa’s whiskey-laden greeting at the opened window would nearly knock me over—but two flights below he charmed the children.

Each of my uncles in Delaware County furnished some sort of drama just by being there. From my earliest days I looked forward to visiting Uncle Charley and Aunt Becky (Mom’s eldest sister, Rebecca),
who had a clothing shop, Frankel’s, on Third Street in Chester. When I was still a kid, Uncle Charley had an ancient Dodge which had to be cranked to start. It was exciting to watch. If one was slow to release one’s hold as the engine fired up, the rapidly rotating crank could fracture a hand or arm. Much later, researching T. E. Lawrence, I found that once, in the 1920s, returning to his Tank Corps base on his motorcycle, and chancing upon a motorist who needed help, he stopped and cranked the engine for him. The whipsaw fractured Lawrence’s arm, but like the masochist he covertly was, he refused to let on that he was hurt. He remounted his bike and using only his good arm motored on to Bovington Camp.\(^2\)

Next door to Frankel’s was a firehouse. When a call to action came, the klaxon on its roof hooted so loudly that the walls in the shop shook—and I could dash out to watch the firemen don their gear and the wagons roar out. I often asked to go along, but the chief said the rules didn’t permit it. I waited for their return to look for evidence that they had fought a real fire rather than responded to false alarm or to a cat stuck up a tree.

Linwood is a village somewhat to the north of Route 13 between Chester and Marcus Hook. Uncle Lou Zabludoff (husband of my mother’s sister Mary) was proprietor of a butcher shop and grocery at the top of Summit Street. In Russian Poland before he emigrated he had been a farmer near the village of Zabludov, known for its architecturally distinctive wooden synagogue, and he had taken his butchering skills and the surname with him. He loved to sing Yiddish songs in his rumbling bass, and when no customers were in the shop his voice could be heard outdoors. His favorite was M. M. Warshawsky’s plaintive ”*Ofyn Pripechik*” (“On the Hearth”):

\[\text{On the hearth a little fire burns} \\
\text{And it is warm in the little house} \\
\text{And the rabbi is teaching the little children} \\
\text{The alphabet....} \\
\text{When, children, you grow older,} \\
\text{You will understand} \\
\text{How many tears lie in these letters} \\
\text{And how much crying ....} \]

Down the hill where Summit Street ended was a Pentecostal—“Holy Roller”—charismatic church. When we visited Linwood, Lou and
Mary’s daughter, Charlotte, a day younger than I, sometimes slipped down with me when dusk shielded us, to peer into a basement window at the parishioners, who often wailed and shrieked in prayer, jerking their bodies violently, often on the church floor. When spotted, we would run away. It was an adventure—but only when we were small and unidentifiable.

In the wartime summer of ’44 in Marcus Hook, I became a surrogate son as well as floor-sweeper and substitute everything. Gene Mark was then on Guam in the Pacific, where big B-29s were being deployed to hit Japan. In the deference I first received from the other employees at Mark’s I felt almost like the kid brother he did not have, but that made me work all the harder for my forty cents an hour. With oily sawdust I swept the floors in the morning before opening at nine, swept them again at closing, and took over one counter after another while clerks went to lunch or left on vacation. On my own lunch hours, I walked. Refineries surrounded the town, and low, long grey tankers huddled at riverside. It seemed close to the war. On returning, I often slipped into the newspaper shop, narrow as a hallway but replete with out-of-town papers on display racks with exotic mastheads and colorful stories.

In the evening at dinner in Delaware, Uncle Jack ritually switched on Lowell Thomas at 6:45 to keep us up with events. Thomas’s corporate sponsor on NBC radio was Sun Oil, which had a refinery at Marcus Hook. When the store was open evenings, we returned after Lowell Thomas signed off, ten minutes north to the shop on Post Road.

Sundays were different. Down a path through the woods in Arden, off narrow Harvey Road and closed in by tall poplars, was a dammed-up stream and swimming pool. The water was frigid even in the warmest months, and the bottom was slimy with mud and decaying leaves, but on Sundays I was in the equivalent of summer camp, and but for the intrusions of the radio at the house, the war was far away.

Back in Philadelphia in September, I found employment after school. Often I would skip my last class to go to work early. Because the teacher failed to take roll, I got away with it. That emboldened me to try it with the next late class—and I flunked trigonometry, which I couldn’t fathom anyway. I had become Sudock Neckwear’s first and last employee. For years the shop had been a mom-and-pop operation. My job interview with Morris Sudock was swift. “Can you wrap packages and
sweep floors?” I explained that at Mark’s I would sweep up after hours, and that I was also proficient at gift-wrapping. “Just brown paper here,” said Sudock. I was hired at fifty cents an hour.

The shop at 306 Market Street—98 Market Street in Colonial days, where James Wilson, grandfather of President Woodrow Wilson, printed the paper *Aurora* in 1813—was a long and narrow space lined with counters and shelves behind them. A wooden cutting table bisected front from rear, which looked out on an alley where in a small, worn brick building Benjamin Franklin had lived. Toward Second Street eastward to the Delaware River, the street sloped sharply to the docks. It was a grimy district of jobbers and wholesalers in what was called the “rag trade,” with garment factories on the creaky upper floors. Many were now making service uniforms, and one neckwear establishment on a second floor nearby on Third Street seemed to manufacture nothing but khaki scarves and neckties. Even Sudock’s sold khaki ties by the gross.

Although merchants came in to examine new fabrics and styles, and to order ties by the dozens, at first I had little to do with the over-the-counter business. Irma Sudock, short and stocky like her husband, her greying hair ineffectively dyed jet black, was the bookkeeper and alternative salesperson. Morris—“Mr. Sudock” to me—explained to customers with a grin that I was “the assistant manager.” Soon in effect I was, as Irma often exploited my availability to slip to the back where a kettle always simmered, to drink strong, sweet tea from a glass, and look over the orders for me to fill and pack. Russian ways had never left her. The couple had escaped from Odessa with almost nothing soon after the Communist regime came and found a livelihood that improved as the Depression gave way to war industry. (The failed bank at Fourth and Market became a Horn & Hardart cafeteria to which we resorted for meals, inserting nickels into slots and watching food magically appear. Thirty-five cents furnished a substantial lunch, including milk and a slice of pie.)

The Sudocks spoke little about their past to me, and I knew not to ask. I hadn’t thought much about Soviet Russia since the days of Red Fred, for Stalin’s empire had become, however awkwardly, our wartime ally after Pearl Harbor, courtesy of Hitler’s invasion the previous June. That innocence changed briefly when a girl I met in my waning high
school months persuaded me to go with her to a “party” given by a group about which I knew nothing—American Youth for Democracy. The cleverest and most interesting teenagers around were involved, Sylvia claimed. The AYD occupied a second-floor walk-up over a shop just below mid-city. The noisy, crowded rooms cluttered with folding chairs were festooned with banners and slogans trumpeting “solidarity” with our Russian “brothers-in-arms,” but they could hardly be seen through the choking clouds of tobacco smoke. Several young men used hands free of cigarettes to shake mine and to offer me a paper cup and something to drink. The bottle looked as clear as water, but the label identified the beverage as vodka. “I’m not old enough,” I said. “Neither are most of us,” one laughed. “Are you interested in joining us?” I confessed I knew nothing about the organization but its initials. “They’re almost new,” he said. “We used to be the YCL—the Young Communist League. But peace is coming and we have to be prepared for the new politics.” Soon I told Sylvia that the smoke was too much to take. (So were the politics.) I was leaving. Would she stay or go? She’d manage OK, she said. I trudged down the stairs into the welcome night air and walked the twenty blocks home.

I never told the Sudocks, nor anyone else, about my AYD experience of less than an hour. They would have been appalled.

Some of the Sudock clientele—these always arrived late in the day—were strange-looking elderly men with pinched faces, wearing shabby suits that seemed to come from a Salvation Army thrift shop. They carried cheap sample cases with handles and clasps, and displayed neckwear in them, sometimes buying a few additional ties to freshen the top pull-up drawer. When they came in, Irma retreated to her teapot and Morris taught me how to take over. The shortage of adult males in the nonessential work force had made my job possible; yet there were enough males beyond the draft, or in war work, to sustain a curious subterranean sales operation. Sudocks sold more than neckties. Beneath our counter, and below the shallow top shelf of the sample cases, was the merchandise attracting the men from whom Irma fled. Their furtive trade was in our unadvertised elastic, not-entirely-legal product, banned in many jurisdictions and unlawful to send through federal mail.
The itinerant salesmen we supplied stationed themselves at factory or shipyard entrances and exits or at nearby neighborhood taverns, where ready markets existed. (Military posts had little potential. Servicemen on leave or liberty were usually able, despite irate Congressmen and clergymen, to dip into a subtly visible supply of condoms at no cost.) It was prudent, in case the local police came by, for peddlers to keep the lower-level merchandise unexposed. Handling such transactions at fifteen gave me a delicious frisson of abetting what was in some jurisdictions a possibly criminal practice, or at a further remove, encouraging commercial trysts in roadhouses and cheap hotels. There were plenty of the latter a block or two to the north of the shop, sandwiched among tatty burlesque houses. But, Morris Sudock assured me, the gaunt grey men were performing a necessary war service, supporting the morale of the work force. Further, they paid on the spot, in cash. Although the rubber shortage had diminished supplies of products from tires to garden hoses, the availability of condoms remained unaffected.

As the Post Office nearby only accepted our cartons of neckties, wrapping and shipping our dubious merchandise in brown paper for clients at a distance was a delicate task, as the packages were often so small. (I sometimes wondered as I worked how the Army and Navy paid for their give-away stocks, or received them, given federal restrictions.) My follow-up task for the little parcels was to haul canvas sacks of them two blocks away to the Bourse Building at Fifth Street, to the ground-floor Railway Express office. Even a gross of Ramses or Trojans or whatever was a conspicuously insignificant packet for Railway Express to handle. The clerks soon got to know me, and smiled wickedly, for they knew how many thousands of episodes of joy they assisted in abetting. “Would you like a postcard for this one?” they would sometimes ask with crooked grins about a particularly puny shipment.

I never intimated the Sudock sideline to my parents, or, especially, to my friends, concerned that I would be asked to slip samples to my buddies—more to display for bragging than to be concealed for use. But at fifteen I was learning about life beneath its top drawer. Sex was not a subject, yet, for open talk. When Mrs. Costello, across Percy street, told her daughter that a “caboose” was on the way—there had been no child since Sally, now in high school—the anguished response was, “Mother, how could you?”
Although the merchandise at Sudock’s remained largely as before, we sold more and more khaki neckties as the Army burgeoned and the civilian market depleted. Change came more abruptly to the ramshackle knitwear factories along Third Street occupying most firetrap floors. The miserable early winter afflicting post-D-Day France had left slogging forward troops drastically short in underwear and socks, which seldom survived field washings, when that was even possible, and were as crucial as cartridges. The neighboring workshops and their like were ordered into March to produce seven million pairs of socks a month for freighting by air. When I left my job each evening their lights were still on, and would remain on into morning and after.

After work at Sudock’s, I would usually weave westward through the rush-hour crowds along Market Street to Tenth to catch a Number 23 trolley south toward home. On April 12, 1945, a Thursday, I kept up my quick pace, often glancing at newsstand headlines as I passed. Allied troops were pressing across the Rhine into central Germany, and the Russians were closing in on Berlin. I pushed my way onto the always-crowded and usually noisy trolley pausing at the traffic light at Market Street, expecting as usual to be a rush-hour straphanger. This time the conductress who usually clutched for my coin didn’t seem to want mine, or anyone else’s. Her eyes were swollen and red with weeping, and she wiped her face with her uniform sleeve as she waved us on. Looking about, I realized that everyone already aboard was weeping unashamedly.

As the Number 23 trolley lurched ahead across Market Street, I summoned up the courage to ask the woman seated beneath my strap what was going on. “Haven’t you heard?” she said, dabbing at her eyes with a damp handkerchief. “The President is dead.” The trolley had come a long way south, from Chestnut Hill, and the news reached those already seated from incoming riders who had heard the flash on the radio. As more passengers boarded with bulletins from Washington and Warm Springs, Georgia, even unbelievers—wartime was replete with rumors—began accepting the reality that Franklin Delano Roosevelt had indeed died suddenly. Most of us, barring only the elderly, had known, or cared about, no other president. Unlike his immediate predecessors, FDR had been a force in their lives—undoing the De-
pression, managing the biggest war ever, confiding his thoughts and his reassurances to them on radio “Fireside Chats”—almost a friend.

The fourth-term campaign against youngish Governor Tom Dewey of New York, derided by Teddy Roosevelt’s eldest daughter, Alice, although a Republican, as “the bridegroom on the wedding cake,” had ended only five months earlier. Late in October the President had toured Philadelphia in the rain in an open convertible to demonstrate, although he was actually dying, whether or not he knew it, his presidential vigor. At nine that night he spoke on the radio from Shibe Park, the baseball home of the doormat Philadelphia Athletics. I went with Dad and Uncle Sol. “Watch your car?” teenagers on Lehigh Avenue asked as we parked. Dad knew that the car’s safety from vandalism had to be ransomed for a coin, and dropped one in an open palm.

The President spoke at a bank of microphones from a wooden ramp behind second base, on which his open green Packard was perched. His familiar voice thundered indistinctly from the loudspeakers. In the overflow crowd we were so far away in the left field stands that we could not really see him as more than a blur, lifting his battered campaign fedora, but the papers the next morning showed the trademark grin in a face now lined and thin. (The ticket I saved shows, for public consumption, a more hale Roosevelt from an earlier campaign.) We had no idea that he was fading from a failing heart, nor did we know whether FDR knew.3

It didn’t occur to anyone in my hearing, as our trolley clattered on with the dread news, to ask whether we had a new president, or who he was. I shut my eyes tightly and tried not to let the tears flow, opening them only to watch for Porter Street, where I got off. The trolley was still filled with sobbing passengers. The last stop would be the Navy Yard.

I rushed home to the radio. The big Bosch console was already blaring, and my father was standing unsteadily in front of it since returning from work much earlier than usual. No one wanted a visit from an insurance agent at such a time. “Roosevelt died this afternoon,” Dad said, his voice breaking. “Harry Truman is the new president.” At Uncle Sol’s tailor shop three houses away, Sol had already tacked a black ribbon on the fliespecked 1932 campaign poster of FDR, which he vowed he would never take down. I wrote a maudlin poem for the
occasion, beginning, “Add a gold star to our nation’s flag....” Was it published anywhere then? I don’t recall. Not all schoolboy scribblings made it to print.

The next day there was the eleventh grade as usual, and work afterwards. A war was still ongoing. But breaking his unspoken rule about distractions from business, Morris Sudock had brought from home a small radio, and kept it on all day in the absence of clientele. He began talking openly about retiring. The war would end soon, he said. No one would want his business now. He would try to get a competitor to buy his stock cheap. I didn’t ask him whether any of his associates in the rag trade also carried his second-tier merchandise. A few months later he confided that he and Irma would be relocating to Mountain View, California, then a sleepy town decades before its Silicon Valley boomtime. I would soon be out of a job, and began looking for a new one.

Nearly eighteen years later, in 1963, I was a visiting professor at UCLA. I could have never anticipated any of the years between. As the semester in Los Angeles ended I went on by invitation to do a weekend gig as a lecturer in the university’s summer adult education program at Lake Arrowhead, the perks including a resort interlude for my family. After a well-attended evening talk, some listeners came to the platform to chat, and as they began drifting away, a little old man with short, cropped white hair left his seat and began walking toward me. As he came forward I saw that he was un-knotting a white tie, and folding it into his hand. Pressing it into mine, he said:

“Professor, do you remember me?”

“Yes, I do, Mr. Sudock,” I said.

As August 1945 began, I was on the first vacation I had ever paid for from my own earnings. Wartime had made it possible. Several friends and I, all with work income soon to vanish, had squeezed into a single bedroom cubicle in a sweltering Atlantic City rooming house, from which we haunted the crowded beaches by day and the lively Boardwalk at night. Yet we could not escape the war. Movie houses on Atlantic Avenue that we didn’t attend, but which attracted patrons seeking air-conditioning, were featuring such films as
Pride of the Marines, The Story of G.I. Joe, and (already, about occupied Italy in 1943) A Bell for Adano. Although the sea at the horizon was no longer silhouetted by tankers and freighters hugging the shore for safety from prowling German U-boats, overhead, still, day and night, were the hovering blimps of the anti-submarine patrol. As a precaution they seemed unnecessary. The Japanese were unlikely to menace the Atlantic.

Harsher reminders of the continuing war were the big hotels overlooking the Boardwalk. They had been converted into convalescent hospitals for war wounded, and G.I.s in blue corduroy robes sunned themselves on the hotel terraces and gazed out the windows. If Japan had to be invaded to end the war, I realized, all such converted resorts everywhere would be overcrowded.

Austerity hung over our holidaying. We didn’t mind that each of us had little to spend. Some things besides sun and sand and adventuring along the Boardwalk were free. At Heinz Pier we could queue up for samples of trademark gherkins and other goodies—not all the fabled fifty-seven varieties, but enough to make a wait worthwhile. There was a sense of watchful anticipation. War in Europe had ended in May. Although Japan still resisted fanatically, B-29 Superfortresses were bombing the hell out of the Home Islands.

Predictions in the press were that V-J Day would outstrip V-E Day in May in noisy celebration, but vacation week was no time to be peering at newspaper headlines outside Boardwalk shops. Still, that Tuesday, as we hauled our blankets and beach paraphernalia toward a location staked out the day before because the girls we had met promised to be there, we watched flurries of what clearly couldn’t be snow floating down from windows in the commandeered hotels. Approaching closer and looking up, we could see that the service convalescents, their military bathrobes awry, were emptying pillows of feathers, and shouting. It was impossible to make out the words, but we understood that the reason was likely to be found at a newsstand. The banner we expected to see was “WAR ENDS”—but instead the August 7 Philadelphia Inquirer, the nearest big-city paper, boldly headlined across much of the front page
We realized from the obliteration of Hiroshima that when we were old enough, which would be soon now, we wouldn’t have to storm the beaches of Honshu and Kyushu. (Yet six years later, almost to the day, I disembarked from the troopship *Woodford* in Yokohama en route to a new war in Korea.) The beaches were becoming restless with chatter, and littered quickly with newspapers which in the hot, still air refused to blow away into the breakers.

Three days later came the news of Russia’s plunge into the Asian war to grab whatever spoils were within reach, and of a second atomic bomb, this one targeting Nagasaki. Rumors that the Japanese had surrendered flooded the beach like high tide. We rushed again to the Boardwalk when we saw more feathers floating down from the convalescent hotels, hoping for a frenzy of jubilation and girls eager, despite our sandy, wet bathing suits, to be embraced. But the mood was suddenly wary. Someone had heard the news from someone who had heard it on the radio. Crowds surged, then thinned out, everyone seeking some hard evidence, perhaps a passerby with a newspaper headline proclaiming “PEACE.” It was premature. We went back to the beach.

That Sunday we took the Pennsy train and then the Delaware River ferry back to Philadelphia, leaving Atlantic City as late as we could in order to get in a few more hours of holiday. It was nearly dark as we disembarked at the wharf, with a walk of a mile to come, to reach the trolley, and home. As we trudged along Market Street we began encountering boisterous throngs. A passerby told us that the illuminated news ticker on the *Evening Bulletin* building near City Hall had been displaying a dispatch from Washington that the Japanese had surrendered. The streets kept filling up with shouting but mostly sober celebrants. It was Sunday. The bars were closed.

Burdened by our suitcases we pressed, anyway, into the crush of people. It was awkward with our luggage to try to hug happy, and—we assumed—willing females, but we tried our luck, with poor results. Handicapped, we didn’t want our suitcases snatched. Pressing beyond our trolley stop toward the *Evening Bulletin* news zipper, we arrived only in time to see the flickering bulbs flash a disclaimer. The United
Press was withdrawing its premature beat. Some awkward technicalities remained. The war was still on.

We turned away. The crowds were dispersing and the trolleys running again. It had been a frustrating return.

Tuesday was different. At 7:00 PM from the White House, President Harry Truman announced the real surrender. Already home from work, I hurried north on Broad Street with my pals from the Atlantic City holiday, and a few more, toward the City Hall area, which was already swarming with jubilant crowds. The white hats of sailors from the Navy Yard were obvious everywhere, and the men of the Navy seemed unable to keep them from being swiped, or to fend off the hordes of embraceable, or at least willing, females of every age and shape.

We waded in, most of us unsuccessfully. “Get lost, kid!” was my reward for the good fight I had put up since Pearl Harbor. “This ain’t no kid’s war!” said a painted lady reaching past me for a sailor.

The crowded streets were impassable for trolleys. A very young sixteen, I walked home to wait for the next war.

Endnotes

1. Possibly meaning uncoordinated, which fit outlandish attire meant to be rebellious.
