The Plot Against America

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF PHILIP ROTH

Born and raised in the Weequahic neighborhood of Newark, New Jersey, Philip Roth grew up in a Jewish family. His parents, Herman and Bess, were both second-generation Americans with roots in Eastern Europe. After graduating from Weequahic High School, Roth attended Rutgers University, Bucknell University, and the University of Chicago, working as an instructor at the University of Chicago's writing program before going on to teach at the University of Iowa, Princeton, and the University of Pennsylvania. One of the most celebrated—and controversial—writers of the 20th century, Roth rose to prominence with *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959). Roth's raw, controversial novel *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) rocketed him to literary celebrity and signaled the earnest start of an unapologetic writing career. Famous for his lusty or lecherous protagonists, Roth's expansive body of work is often highly autobiographical and rooted in Jewish identity. Some of his most notable novels include *American Pastoral*, *The Human Stain*, and *Sabbath's Theater*. Roth was the winner of three PEN/Faulkner Awards, two National Book Awards for Fiction, and two National Book Critics Circle Awards. Roth was also awarded the Edward MacDowell Medal by the prestigious MacDowell Colony in 2001, the National Humanities Medal by President Barack Obama in 2011, and the Man Booker International Prize for lifetime achievement later in 2011. Roth held honorary degrees from Bard College, Columbia University, Harvard University, and the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. His work has been widely adapted for film and television. Later in life, Roth controversially stated that his perception of the Jewish experience was that it was "really not interesting," identifying himself as an "American" before anything else. Roth died in Manhattan in May of 2018 and, according to his final wishes, was buried at the Bard College Cemetery in an atheistic ceremony.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The events of *The Plot Against America* span from June of 1940 to October of 1942. Within that time period, though Roth makes significant alterations to the course of American history, he also employs a cast of characters comprised of many real-life historical figures. When Charles Lindbergh runs for the presidency of the United States on a Republican, isolationist, "America First" platform, he sweeps the 1940 election and unseats Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a two-term president and advocate of the New Deal. In reality, Roosevelt was elected to a third term as president in 1940 and, in spite of efforts to keep America out of World War II while attempting to negotiate peace, he declared war on Japan (and later Germany and Italy) in December of 1941 following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. In real life, Charles Lindbergh was a non-interventionist who publicly blamed the British, the Jews of the world, and the Roosevelt administration for pushing for entry into the war. Though Lindbergh supported the war effort after America became involved, he operated only within the Pacific Theater and never fought against Germany.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Plot Against America is just one of Philip Roth's many works which feature a fictionalized version of himself as the protagonist. Other books in Roth's cycle of novels and memoirs based on his own experiences include *Deception: A Novel*, *Patrimony: A True Story*, and *Operation Shylock: A Confession*—the writing and publication of these auto-fictional or autobiographical works spans 1988 to 2004. *The Plot Against America* also exists within a rich tradition of dystopian novels which imagine what a fascist America might look and feel like and serve as cautionary tales against allowing the U.S. to succumb to fascism. Sinclair Lewis's 1935 novel *It Can't Happen Here*, Jack London's 1908 novel *The Iron Heel*, and Philip K. Dick's 1962 novel *The Man in the High Castle* are all dystopian or alternate-history novels which examine the fall of the United States to authoritarian or oligarchical regimes which quickly dispense with democracy and profoundly alter life in America forever. As a novel that's deeply concerned with the Jewish American identity, *The Plot Against America* is also similar to books like Chaim Potok's *My Name is Asher Lev*, Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, and Dani Shapiro's *Inheritance*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Plot Against America
- **Where Written:** New York City
- **When Published:** 2004
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Historical Fiction; Alternate History
- **Setting:** Newark, New Jersey from June 1940–October 1942
- **Climax:** In the early days of October 1942, President Charles Lindbergh's plane mysteriously disappears in flight between Louisville and Washington.
- **Antagonist:** Charles Lindbergh; Rabbi Bengelsdorf
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

True Crime. The real-life disappearance of Charles Lindbergh Jr. made waves across the world and was called the "Crime of the Century"—the "Lindbergh kidnapping" case was closed in May of the same year when the child's remains were discovered on the side of a highway in New Jersey. A German immigrant carpenter, Bruno Richard Hauptmann, was charged with the crime and eventually sentenced to death.

Fact or Fiction? In a lengthy, 27-page postscript to the novel, Roth includes a section of historical and biographical information on the major political and religious figures and ordinary people whose lives he fictionalizes in the pages of *The Plot Against America*. In providing factual information broken down by year about the presidency of FDR and the career trajectories of Charles Lindbergh, Fiorello La Guardia, Walter Winchell, and more, Roth wrote in *The New York Times* that he hoped to "establish the book as something other than fabulous"—in other words, he wanted to show how his fictional imaginings were underpinned and steered by the historical record.

PLOT SUMMARY

Philip Roth is just seven in the fall of 1940 when aviator Charles Lindbergh is elected president of the United States, having campaigned on an isolationist, "America First" platform. Lindbergh's unseating of Franklin Delano Roosevelt sends shockwaves through Philip's predominantly Jewish neighborhood in Newark, New Jersey. Lindbergh's genteel diplomacy toward Adolf Hitler set Philip's parents, Bess and Herman, on edge—they begin to worry that the anti-Semitism which has been simmering beneath the surface of American life is about to boil over. Even more confusing to Jewish people in Newark is the Conservative rabbi Lionel Bengelsdorf's support of Lindbergh—and his declaration that as an "American Jew," his loyalty is to his homeland. Philip and his friends, including the nerdy Seldon Wishnow and the fifth-grader Earl Axman, try to distract themselves from their parents' anxieties. All of the games they play, however, revolve around war. Philip begins having nightmares in which all of the **stamps** in his treasured collection are covered in black swastikas.

In June of 1941, six months after Lindbergh's inauguration, the Roths are reeling from the sudden departure of Alvin, Philip and his brother Sandy's 20-year-old cousin, an orphan who has been the Roths' ward for nearly seven years. Alvin has left for Canada to fight for the British in World War II. Amid increasing fears among Jewish people as the United States (led by Lindbergh) has all but endorsed Hitler's authoritarian regime, the Roths decide to take a long-planned trip to Washington, D.C. The Roths hire a guide, Mr. Taylor, to take them around the city—but as the Roths tour Washington and Herman loudly speaks about the disgraces Lindbergh has brought upon America, he attracts negative attention from other tourists. After being called a "loudmouth Jew" at the Lincoln Memorial, Herman tries to keep his head high—but upon returning to their hotel, the Roths find that their belongings have been removed from their room and their reservation has been canceled. Herman is determined to finish the trip, and after checking into a new hotel, the Roths continue touring the city. After a confrontation with yet another anti-Semitic man at a diner, Herman loudly sings for all the patrons, displaying his unwillingness to back down from his rights as an American.

Back in Newark, the Roths continue to adjust to life under Lindbergh. The president's administration has created the Office of American Absorption (OAA), whose programs undermine the stability of Jewish families and erase the power of Jewish constituencies across the country. Sandy, however, signs up to be part of an OAA initiative called the Just Folks program, which pairs young Jewish boys with families in America's "heartland" for a summer. In spite of the Roths' opposition to Sandy's going, Bess's sister Evelyn—who has recently been hired to work as Bengelsdorf's secretary in his new position with the New Jersey OAA—calls Bess and Herman "Jews [who are] afraid of [their] shadow[s.]" Eventually, the Roths relent. Days after Sandy's departure, the Roths receive a letter: Alvin has lost his leg in combat and will be returning home. Weeks later, when Sandy returns, he speaks reverently of life in Kentucky and tells Philip that he can't wait to return. Meanwhile, Evelyn and Bengelsdorf—who have been having an affair—become engaged. The Roths host the rabbi at their house for dinner, and he and Herman clash. The next day, Evelyn calls Bess to inform her that the rabbi has selected Sandy to work in recruiting for Just Folks. Bess takes a job working in a department store. She funnels her earnings into a bank account in Montreal, worried that the family might soon be forced to flee to Canada. With Sandy and Bess always out and with Herman more on edge than ever, Philip is left alone much of the time. He and Earl begin a daily ritual of riding the city bus after school, "following Christians" in order to observe them.

In January of 1942, Alvin arrives home. Philip is obsessed with and terrified by Alvin's stump, which continually erupts in sores due his **prosthetic leg**'s imperfect fit. As Alvin's stump heals and his ability to get around improves, he begins shooting craps with a gang of youths including the crook Shushy Margulis. Alvin draws the ire of his Uncle Monty for failing to make something of himself. Monty all but forces Alvin to take a job at his produce store. In spite of the job, Alvin continues playing craps with Shushy. An FBI agent begins questioning the Roth family, cornering them separately while they're out and about in Newark. The agent asks about Alvin's habits—and whether he's called anyone in the government "fascist." Around this time,

Seldon's father, Mr. Wishnow, dies suddenly. The rumor is that he has hung himself, though Bess swears to Philip that he died of cancer. Alvin loses his job after the FBI agent questions other workers about him—Monty is indebted to the gangster Longy Zwillman, who doesn't want Alvin causing trouble for the business. Alvin leaves for Philadelphia to work for Shushy's gangster uncle.

As spring arrives, scandal breaks out: Lindbergh and his wife, Anne Morrow Lindbergh, are hosting a prominent Nazi, Joachim von Ribbentrop, at the White House. Bengelsdorf and Aunt Evelyn are invited—and Evelyn comes by the house to ask if Sandy can come with them. Herman kicks Evelyn out and tells her never to return. The next morning, the angry Sandy calls Herman a "dictator worse than Hitler." Herman learns that Shepsie Tirschwell, his childhood friend and a projectionist at the nearby Newsreel Theater, is planning on fleeing to Winnipeg. Philip sneaks into the Newsreel one afternoon to see footage of Evelyn and Bengelsdorf at the state dinner. When the show is over, an attendant brings Philip up to the projectionist booth, where Shepsie keeps Philip until his father arrives to pick him up. Herman reprimands Philip for sneaking into the theater and strikes him across the face in the street.

As summer begins, the Roths receive a letter: Herman's company, Metropolitan Life, is relocating him to Kentucky under the edicts of Homestead 42. Homestead 42 encourages families to move westward, incentivizing the trip with free land; unlike the original 1862 act, Homestead 42 is aimed only at Jewish families in coastal cities. Bess begins breaking down at the prospect of living in a rural town where people are hostile toward Jews. Philip travels to Aunt Evelyn's office at the OAA one afternoon to beg her not to relocate them—and to send Seldon and his widowed mother instead. Aunt Evelyn assures Philip that life in Kentucky will be grand, and that all of Rabbi Bengelsdorf's programs are for the betterment of American Jews.

As Bess urges Philip to spend more and more time with Seldon, Philip begins stealing clothing from him, secreting it away in a suitcase in the cellar alongside $20 he received from Alvin. After hearing a radio broadcast in which the Jewish journalist Walter Winchell declares that concentration camps are likely to come to America, Philip decides he must run away from home. Philip collects his suitcase and stamp album and sets out—but as he crosses a field filled with horses, he startles one, gets kicked in the head, and wakes up the next morning in the hospital. His beloved stamps are nowhere to be found.

Herman quits work in order to avoid moving out west under Homestead 42. He takes a job at Monty's store working the night shift. Bess quits her department store job and Sandy stops speaking out against "ghetto Jews" so often. Meanwhile, Aunt Evelyn and Bengelsdorf get married, and the Roths are not invited to the ceremony. Seldon and Mrs. Wishnow are relocated to Kentucky under Homestead 42, and Philip is surprised at his grief when they leave. Walter Winchell, fired for his inflammatory words on his last broadcast, announces his candidacy for president and begins a speaking tour around the country shortly after Labor Day. Winchell is received well enough in the tri-state area, but in Boston, anti-Semitic riots break out. When Winchell reaches Michigan, an American "Kristallnacht" erupts across Detroit. The violence spreads quickly to the Midwest. On October 5th, Winchell is assassinated in Louisville, Kentucky.

Alvin returns to Newark the night after Winchell's assassination with a fiancée, Minna Schapp, in tow. Alvin wants to make peace with the family he's left behind—but when Herman accuses Alvin of being indifferent to Jewish suffering in America, Alvin points out his prosthetic as proof of his having "wrecked his life for the Jews" and then spits in Herman's face. A horrible fight ensues. Afterward, Herman goes to the hospital for stitches while Alvin and Minna return to Philadelphia. Later that night, gunshots erupt in the street. The Roths stay with their new neighbors, the Cucuzzas, for the night, learning in the morning that a fight broke out between the Jewish police force of Longy's gangsters and the Newark police. Herman calls Shepsie to ask for advice about emigrating to Canada. Philip fears his American childhood is over—yet over the next several days, an astounding series of events takes place: when Lindbergh's plane disappears between a rally in Louisville and Washington, his vice president, Burton K. Wheeler, declares martial law in America. Rumors in the foreign press suggest that Lindbergh has traveled to Berlin to offer himself to the Nazis, and the German press retaliates by suggesting a Jewish conspiracy is behind Lindbergh's disappearance. The FBI arrests Bengelsdorf, the First Lady, and a number of Jewish government officials. Several days later, after her release, Anne Morrow Lindbergh addresses the nation via broadcast and calls for Congress to remove Wheeler from office. Two and a half weeks later, FDR is elected to a third term. Lindbergh is never seen again, and the wreckage of his plane is never found.

On the first night of anti-Semitic riots across the country following the foreign press's report, Seldon calls the Roths to report that his mother has not come home from work. Bess, over a series of long-distance calls, successfully calms Seldon down and secures help for him from the Mawhinneys, the family Sandy stayed with while in Kentucky with Just Folks—it turns out they live just miles from the Winshows' new home. The next morning, Sandy and Herman set out on a drive across the country to collect Seldon and bring him home—his mother has been murdered in a riot in Louisville. Aunt Evelyn breaks into the cellar and attempts to squat there, insisting she knows "the truth" about the Lindberghs and their plot with the Nazis. According to Bengelsdorf, a crazed Aunt Evelyn tells Philip and Bess, Lindbergh and his wife long ago made a pact with the Nazis, who kidnapped their child Charles Jr. The Lindberghs agreed to run a puppet government in America in exchange for

their child's safety. After a fraught, fearful trip, Seldon, Herman, and Sandy arrive home safely. Seldon stays with the Roths for several months, taking up residence in the bed once occupied by Alvin. This time, though there is no stump to care for, Philip realizes that Seldon himself is the stump—and that Philip is his friend's only hope of a "prosthesis."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Philip Roth – The narrator and protagonist of the novel, the "Philip Roth" of the book is a fictionalized younger version of author Philip Roth. He's Herman and Bess's son and Sandy's younger brother. By fictionalizing his own childhood—and using the names of many members of his immediate family in so doing—Roth is better able to paint a portrait of a family authentically reacting to an unprecedented new chapter in American history and in Jewish life. The young Philip has been raised on his father, Herman's, belief in the promises of the American dream. Obsessed with **stamp**-collecting, FDR, and baseball, Philip leads an idyllic American life—yet as Lindbergh is elected to the presidency and warnings of America going "fascist" begin seeping into Philip's neighborhood, Philip becomes deeply perturbed and desperate to find a way out of the nightmare that has become his life. Just seven years old at the start of the novel and only nine at its end, Philip's childlike understanding of the world around him is made all the more profound by the swift changes in America that take place during Roth's alternate history of the years 1940–1942. As Philip's brother Sandy becomes a mouthpiece for Lindbergh's programs aimed at assimilating Jews, and their cousin Alvin flees to Canada to fight for the British against Hitler, Philip finds himself lonely and confused, uncertain of the very ground beneath his feet. He's consumed by thoughts of war, of conflicting emotions about his own idol worship of FDR, of Lindbergh, and of America itself. Yet Philip is still plagued by day-to-day playground woes and the challenges of growing up, and he becomes a refractive lens through which Roth explores the changing landscapes of New Jersey, the U.S., and indeed the entire world. Naïve, curious, lonesome, and occasionally vindictive, Philip continually finds himself swept away by the tides of change as he struggles to make sense of a hostile and deeply flawed world.

Herman Roth – Philip and Sandy's father and Bess's husband is a loud, emotional firecracker of a man who believes staunchly and steadfastly in the promises of America. Herman is a deeply political person and staunch Democrat who listens to the radio and reads the news almost constantly. After Lindbergh is elected to the presidency—something Herman never believed possible—Herman becomes even more politically outspoken, even as anti-Semitic language and rhetoric seeps into daily life. Herman has instilled in his children a great love for America—a love that he himself refuses to question even as the country becomes hostile toward its Jewish population and as the government seeks to assimilate Jewish people into the "greater fabric" of American society. Confronted with his own inability to turn the tides of history—or to even really control the members of his family—Herman watches angrily yet helplessly as Alvin, Sandy, and Philip rebel in their own separate ways against the paths Herman has worked so hard to open up for them. In many ways, the hotheaded and stubborn Herman is just as willfully ignorant about the true difficulties of Jewish life in America as Sandy and his sister-in-law Evelyn are, though Herman's inability to accept the deepening anti-Semitism all around him stems from sheer disbelief rather than unawareness. Over the course of the novel, Herman finds himself doing things he never imagined he'd do: borrowing a pistol from a neighbor to protect his family, enduring anti-Semitic remarks during a visit to the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, making a plan to escape to Canada, and even driving across the country to the heart of Kentucky to rescue a far-flung neighbor in need. As Herman's ideas of what comprises Jewish life in America are challenged again and again—for worse far more often than for better—Roth exposes the pain and sadness of a man confronting the hollowness of the American dream.

Bess Roth – Philip and Sandy's mother and Herman's wife is a loving, emotional, anxious woman who fights tooth and nail to remain grounded and clear-headed for her family as America plummets into crisis. Raised in a Gentile neighborhood in Elizabeth, New Jersey, Bess grew up feeling ostracized by her peers and disconnected from a real Jewish community—as an adult, Bess has struggled hard to make sure her children are surrounded by other Jewish kids and that they're part of a thriving, tangible Jewish community. Bess, then, is devastated as the anti-Semitism that has long been simmering just below the surface of American culture begins to boil over once Lindbergh is elected president. Bess is helpless to stop the tides of history, and as Lindbergh's presidency paves the way for assimilationist relocation programs aimed at breaking up Jewish communities, Bess's sense of control begins to crack. Bess's gentle demeanor stands in contrast to her husband, Herman's, brash, assertive personality; where Bess is sometimes meek and afraid of making a splash, Herman has no reservations about being his authentic self and making his voice and opinions heard no matter what. Bess and Herman, the novel posits, have very different ideas of what it means to live a Jewish life in America: where Bess was raised feeling othered and ashamed by her Jewishness, Herman feels it is his God-given right as an American to talk and worship openly and authentically. Philip admires his headstrong mother, and many of his most profound revelations about his identity and his place in the world come through his observations of her. For all her anxiety, Bess ultimately proves herself a strong, capable, and tireless woman who will stop at nothing to protect her

family.

Sanford "Sandy" Roth – Philip's older brother and Herman and Bess's son Sandy is a talented artist whose intense desire to please others and prove himself leads him down a dangerous path. Sandy harbors a secret love of Lindbergh, even as Lindbergh's anti-Semitic beliefs and isolationist, antiwar rhetoric sends shockwaves through Sandy's community when Lindbergh is elected president in the fall of 1940. Sandy covets an idyllic American life and longs to separate himself from his Jewish identity. He becomes deeply involved in the Office of American Absorption (OAA), taking Aunt Evelyn's employment there are a sign that the office's programs are safe and innocent. When Sandy participates in the OAA's Just Folks program and spends a summer on a farm in Kentucky, he returns extolling the virtues of rural life and speaking with a country accent. Sandy begins referring to his family as "you people," seeking to separate his own identity from theirs. Sandy's involvement with the OAA rachets up as Bengelsdorf, seeking "revenge" on Herman for Herman's excoriation of the rabbi's isolationist, America First beliefs, appoints Sandy to work as a recruiter for Just Folks. Sandy's continual betrayal of his family frustrates and indeed frightens Bess and Herman, who are already struggling with the painful realities of raising a Jewish family in a world that is growing increasingly hostile toward Jews no matter how much they profess their allegiance to their homeland or to Gentile values. Sandy's struggle is profound and intense, and by the end of the novel, Sandy has more or less abandoned his fealty to Lindbergh and the OAA—yet he still has trouble understanding what his Jewish identity means in the context of the Jewish people's long and painful history.

Alvin Roth – Alvin is Philip and Sandy's 20-year-old cousin. An orphan, Alvin is the son of Herman's deceased brother. At the start of the novel, Alvin is living on his own, but he's been Herman and Bess's ward since he was young. Rebellious, angry, and scandalized by Lindbergh's isolationist, antiwar politics, Alvin quits his lucrative job as valet to a Jewish construction magnate in Newark and runs away to Canada to join the army and fight for the British against Hitler. Within just months of leaving, Alvin is gravely wounded in combat and sent home—he has lost his left leg below the knee. As Alvin comes home to live in the Roths' home, he learns to contend with his stump, which is constantly breaking down and erupting in sores due to his **prosthetic leg**'s imperfect fit. Alvin begins spending his time shooting craps with a neighborhood gang of two-bit crooks, and though the Roths beg Alvin to make something of his life, he shirks their offers of jobs and an education and heads off to Philadelphia to become a gangster. Toward the end of the novel, Alvin returns to make peace—but the rift between him and Herman is so profound that the evening erupts in a horrible physical fight after Herman questions Alvin's loyalty to his Jewish roots and community. Alvin, who insists he "wrecked his life for the Jews" abroad, cannot handle Herman's harping, and so he disappears once again. The angry, directionless Alvin is a deeply complex and emotional figure. Torn between allegiance to his family, to his country, and to his people more largely, Alvin struggles again and again to make the right decision. His failures and setbacks represent the trauma, struggle, and impotence that comprised so much of Jewish life in the World War II era. Alvin's long recuperation from his grievous injuries represents the lifelong and often intergenerational healing process that accompanies trauma. His personal struggle externalizing the collective struggle of American Jews to reconcile the emotional pain of anti-Semitism with the relentless struggle for acceptance on their own terms.

Rabbi Lionel Bengelsdorf – A Newark rabbi who leads his congregation in the Jewish Conservative moment, Rabbi Lionel Bengelsdorf is one of the novel's major antagonists. In many ways, Bengelsdorf—a tall and genteel widower from South Carolina who talks with a thick Southern accent—is one of the most unknowable characters in the novel. As he throws his support behind Lindbergh's isolationist and antiwar platform in the election of 1940, insisting that as an "American Jew" he owes his loyalty to America first rather than to the Jews of Europe in need of American aid, his motivations are unclear. Under Lindbergh's administration, Bengelsdorf is selected to shore up the New Jersey branch of the Office of American Absorption (OAA), a program whose supposed aim is to integrate religious and ethnic minorities more deeply into the "fabric" of American society. In reality, the OAA's programs are aimed at breaking up Jewish families and reducing the power of Jewish constituencies across America—yet Bengelsdorf himself seems to believe that Jews dwell too far "apart" from American life. Whether Bengelsdorf truly believes such things or is merely parroting the party line is never revealed—yet Herman, Bess, and many other Jews see Bengelsdorf's words and actions as traitorous. When Bengelsdorf marries Aunt Evelyn, the Roths find themselves even more despairing of Bengelsdorf's influence not just in their community, but in their own family. Charismatic, opaque, and opportunistic, Bengelsdorf later goes on to pen a memoir detailing the titular "plot against America," citing the Nazis' capture of Charles Lindbergh Jr. and their blackmail of the president and First Lady Anne Lindbergh into enacting the Third Reich's agenda in America. Again, whether any of Bengelsdorf's claims are to be believed is never really clear—but what is evident is that Bengelsdorf is a man drawn to the spectacle of power and envious of the social and political power wielded by the goyim around him.

Aunt Evelyn – Bess's sister Evelyn and Philip and Sandy's aunt is a flighty, easily-influenced woman whose long string of affairs with married men have left her, by the start of the novel, desperate for legitimate companionship. When Aunt Evelyn

goes to work in the Office of American Absorption as Rabbi Lionel Bengelsdorf's secretary, Evelyn quickly begins an affair with the man—soon, the two are engaged. Evelyn, like Bengelsdorf, is drawn to security and power. Over the course of the novel, Herman and Bess look on helplessly as Evelyn sacrifices solidarity with her Jewish community in order to hobnob with the wealthy and powerful through her fiancé's (and later husband's) connections. When Evelyn and Bengelsdorf attend a White House dinner honoring a high-ranking Nazi official, Herman draws the line, ordering Evelyn to stay out of their family's life forever. Evelyn's influence on the impressionable young Sandy, however, is immense, and Sandy essentially becomes a mouthpiece within the Roth household for Evelyn and Bengelsdorf's political rhetoric. Aunt Evelyn detests Jewish people who are "afraid of their own shadow"—she feels that American Jews have nothing to be frightened of. Over the course of the novel, her belief in the truth of Jewish liberation in America turns from a hopeful fallacy to willful, deadly ignorance. By the end of the novel, the "crazed" Aunt Evelyn is on the run from the FBI, believing that they want to arrest her just as they have arrested Bengelsdorf for their knowledge of the true conspiracy behind Lindbergh's presidency. Whether Bengelsdorf and Evelyn's story is true is never revealed, yet it is evident that both of them believe it. Aunt Evelyn's sacrifices of herself and her values serve as a cautionary tale against abandoning one's background, one's family, and one's capacity for canniness and skepticism. Roth uses Evelyn to assert that, unfortunately, Jewish Americans must often be afraid of their own shadow since anti-Semitism is so profound and so ingrained into American society.

Charles Lindbergh – Lindbergh is was a real-life American aviation hero who catapulted to fame in 1927 when he piloted his plane from New York to Paris in under 36 hours, completing the first nonstop transatlantic solo flight. Charles and his wife, Anne Morrow Lindbergh's, lives were marked by tragedy when their son Charles Jr. was kidnapped in 1932 and later found dead on the side of a highway in what many believed to be a ransoming gone wrong. The Lindberghs left America and lived in Europe for many years. In 1939, as Hitler invaded Poland and rose to power in Europe, the United States called upon Lindbergh to visit Germany and report on Nazi aircraft development. While there, Lindbergh wrote of his admiration of Hitler and even accepted a medal from Hermann Göring. Lindbergh was an anti-Semitic white supremacist who warned against "dilution by foreign races" as well "Jewish influence" in America. For all this, Lindbergh became increasingly popular among white supremacist, America First groups—and this, for author Philip Roth, is where history splits. In *The Plot Against America*, Lindbergh runs for president against FDR in 1940 and wins by a landslide. With Lindbergh in charge, life becomes much harder for American Jews, who are suddenly subject to programs mainstreamed by Lindbergh's Office of American Absorption (OAA). As anti-Semitic language and violence across America rises to the surface in frightening ways, families like the Roths feel the effects of Lindbergh's dangerous tenure in the White House acutely. Ultimately, Lindbergh disappears mid-flight in 1942, the wreckage of his plane having mysteriously vanished. He is never seen again. Philip's Aunt Evelyn and Rabbi Bengelsdorf publish accounts of a plot against America in which the Nazis, who were behind Charles Jr.'s kidnapping all along, raised the child in Berlin and used him as blackmail in order to install a president who would do the bidding of the Third Reich, ultimately eliminating the "Jewish question" in America. Lindbergh looms over much of the novel, representing the physical ideal of American skill and enterprise while embodying the most "un-American" values of all, according to Herman Roth: prejudice, isolationism, and a profound lack of solidarity.

Walter Winchell – Winchell was a real-life Jewish ex-vaudevillian, popular radio host, and gossip columnist who rose to prominence in the 1920s and '30s through his work at the *New York Daily Mirror*. Winchell's outspokenness and irreverence made him a controversial figure in real life—yet in the world of *The Plot Against America*, Winchell's staunch refusal to accept Lindbergh's isolationist, "America First," anti-Semitic stance makes him into an important touchstone for the Jewish community. Winchell uses his broadcast to warn his mostly Jewish listeners about the encroachment of fascism into daily life—eventually, he is fired for, according to his superiors, yelling "Fire!" in a crowded theater. In other words, Winchell's Gentile bosses don't believe the terrible things he predicts for Jewish people in America will come to pass. Winchell decides to run for president, but as he sets off on a speaking tour of America, his rallies become epicenters of anti-Semitic violence. Eventually, Winchell is assassinated at a rally in Louisville, sparking a night of terrible riots and violence against Jews across the nation. In real life, Winchell was just as outspoken against Nazism and fascism as he is in the novel, and he attacked the isolationist, pro-German Lindbergh, who was a powerful public figure (though not the president in real life), just as hard. By the end of the war, however, Winchell's politics took a rightward turn and he faded into relative obscurity by the mid-1950s. In the world of the novel, Winchell's voice is not an alarmist presence—rather, his Jewish listeners (families like the Roths) are comforted by the knowledge that someone else shares their concerns and sees the nightmarish changes happening in the daily lives of American Jews.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) – FDR was the 32nd president of the United States, the author of the progressive New Deal programs, and the leader of America's entry into World War II in 1941. A progressive figure who won an unprecedented third term of the presidency in 1940 and, in spite of his detractors' beliefs that he was a "warmonger," did his best to prepare for war while working to keep Americans safe at all costs. Widely regarded as one of the most important

figures in the history of the United States—and, by many, as one of the country's most progressive and popular presidents—FDR's legacy is nonetheless complicated: he incarcerated Japanese and Japanese-American people on the West Coast in internment camps and, for a long time, he resisted entry into World War II in spite of knowing about the plight European Jews were facing. Nonetheless, within the world of *The Plot Against America*, FDR is a hero to families like the Roths. Herman extols Roosevelt as the greatest president in the history of the United States, and because of his father's fervor for the man, Philip in particular comes to admire FDR. He even becomes a **stamp**-collector in order to emulate the president, whose hobbies include stamp-collecting. As Lindbergh's presidency progresses, FDR becomes even more important to the Roths—they and many of their friends and neighbors see him as a voice of reason and as the only candidate who can stop Lindbergh. Roth portrays FDR as an elusive but morally staunch figure who steps in during America's hour of greatest need to repair what Lindbergh's presidency has broken.

Seldon Wishnow – Seldon is a young boy Philip's age who lives in the apartment downstairs from the Roth family in their multi-family house in Newark. Seldon is an awkward, nerdish boy who loves playing chess and who adores and admires Philip—much to Philip's chagrin. Philip finds Seldon so odious that he actually asks his Aunt Evelyn to move Seldon and his widowed mother to Kentucky as part of the Homestead 42 program instead of their own family—though he is horrified when he finds that his request comes to pass. Seldon and his mother live in the rural Danville, Kentucky for only a short while before anti-Semitic riots break out across the Midwest. Mrs. Wishnow is killed, Seldon is orphaned, and it is up to the Roths to collect him from the middle of nowhere and take him in to live with them back in Newark. Seldon is an important figure in the novel because he forces Philip to examine his worst impulses. Philip steals from Seldon, treats playing with him like a chore, and rebuffs him at every chance he gets—yet because of Philip's own actions to try and push Seldon away, Seldon winds up sharing a room with Philip for nearly a year, during which time Philip finds himself caring intimately for his bereaved schoolmate. The neurotic, talkative Seldon provides much of the novel's comic relief in spite of his status as a tragic figure.

Uncle Monty – Herman's brother Monty is the wealthy, outspoken, and generally crass owner of a produce market in Newark. Monty has had a good deal of financial success, yet his business is beholden to the local mob and must make payments to appease gangsters like Longy Zwillman. Nevertheless, Monty is continually motivated to work hard and earn for his family—and when he sees his nephew Alvin languishing and failing to thrive after his return from war, he becomes incensed by what he perceives as Alvin's laziness. Monty is not a soft-spoken man and is rarely able to hold back his explosive opinions for long—as such, his visits to the Roths' home always portend conflict, drama, and small "wars" within their large family.

Earl Axman – Earl is an older boy whom Philip often plays with after school. Earl— whose parents are divorced, "glamorous," and absent—is a bad influence on Philip. It is with Earl that Philip begins his after-school habit of "following Christians" on Newark city buses, often trailing them through their commutes and very nearly up to their doorsteps. Philip and Earl are both insatiably curious about the lives of goyim, finding their Jewish friends and neighbors profoundly uninteresting. Like Philip, Earl is an avid **stamp**-collector, and because Philip thinks of Earl as a kind of mentor, he allows himself to be easily influenced by the naughty and devious Earl's whims.

Shepsie Tirschwell – An old boyhood friend of Herman Roth's, Shepsie runs the Newsreel Theater in Newark, a movie house which plays news footage that Shepsie himself carefully curates and splices together. Shepsie and his family make the difficult decision to flee the United States for Winnipeg, Canada just a little more than a year into Lindbergh's presidency, fearing the increases in anti-Semitism they've seen even in Newark. Kind but strict, Shepsie is burdened by the nature of his work.

Mrs. Wishnow – Mrs. Wishnow is Seldon's mother and Mr. Wishnow's wife (and later, his widow). Mrs. Wishnow is a kind and empathetic woman who wants her son to fit in. Shortly after she and Sheldon are relocated to the rural Danville, Kentucky under the Homestead 42 act, Mrs. Wishnow is brutally murdered in an anti-Semitic riot that breaks out in Louisville.

Mr. Wishnow – Mr. Wishnow is Seldon's father and Mrs. Wishnow's husband. Mr. Wishnow, who has long been sick with cancer of the mouth and throat, dies early on in the novel. While Bess insists that Mr. Wishnow died of natural causes, Philip and his neighborhood friends seize upon a rumor that Mr. Wishnow hung himself in his bedroom closet.

Anne Morrow Lindbergh – Anne is Charles Lindbergh's wife and the First Lady of the United States in author Philip Roth's fictional reimagining of the years 1940–1942. Anne Morrow Lindbergh remains in the background for much of the novel—but she, too, is seemingly too swept up in the pageantry of White House life to protest against or even question the uneasy alliances her husband's administration is making. Toward the end of the novel, Anne Morrow Lindbergh is kidnapped and institutionalized during Burton K. Wheeler's coup—but after escaping her confinement, she takes to the radio to denounce Wheeler's actions and call for an end of martial law, effectively saving America from totalitarian rule and a potential war with Canada. Aunt Evelyn tells Philip that Anne and her husband long ago submitted to the influence of the Nazi Party when they were informed that the Nazis had

kidnapped their son, Charles Jr., and were raising him in Berlin. In light of this information, Roth allows Anne's actions throughout the novel to take on a new light, demonstrating the powerful forces of blackmail and corruption.

Charles Lindbergh, Jr. – Sometimes referred to as "The Lindbergh Baby," Charles Lindbergh, Jr. was the real-life son of Charles Lindbergh and Anne Morrow Lindbergh. When Charles was scarcely two, he disappeared from his bed in the middle of the night; weeks later, his remains were found on the side of a highway in New Jersey. A German man was arrested for the kidnapping and murder, which was seen by many as a ransoming gone wrong. The incident was often referred to as the "Crime of the Century." In the world of *The Plot Against America*, Roth suggests that Charles Jr. was kidnapped by Nazi spies in America and sent to Berlin—the Nazis, Roth implies, used the child as leverage with which they could blackmail Lindbergh into enacting their fascist, anti-Semitic agenda in America. Though Rabbi Bengelsdorf and Aunt Evelyn both believe this scenario is the truth, many denounce their account as crazy or sensational.

Mayor Fiorello H. La Guardia – La Guardia was the real-life mayor of New York City from 1934–1945. He was half-Jewish and half-Italian. Though a registered Republican, La Guardia was a pro-New Deal progressive who instituted major reforms in Depression-era New York. A staunch denouncer of fascism and Nazism, La Guardia is an ally to American Jews during a time of anti-Semitic conflict and violence when he appears in the latter half of *The Plot Against America*.

Burton K. Wheeler – Wheeler was a real-life U.S. senator from Montana who initially supported FDR during his first term but eventually opposed several New Deal tenets and soon became Roosevelt's political enemy. Once a more liberal democrat, in the early 1940s, Wheeler began to align himself with Republicans and Southern Democrats: he opposed American entry into World War II, helped to found the America First movement, and called the Democratic Party the "war party." Wheeler was a fan and supporter of Lindbergh in real life—and in the novel, he becomes Lindbergh's running mate as Lindbergh enters the presidential election of 1940. When Lindbergh disappears in the fall of 1942, Wheeler tries to assume totalitarian power over America over a swift and violent few days in mid-October, but ultimately, he is forced to relinquish power before his dastardly coup is complete.

Abe Steinheim – Steinheim is a wealthy and magnetic Jewish construction mogul in Newark. Alvin works as Abe's driver for a time, and though Abe offers to send Alvin to college and help him make something of himself, Alvin resents Abe. Though Abe is Jewish, Alvin sees Abe as an affront to Jews, since he is flamboyant about his wealth, narcissistic, and committed only to small shows of generosity while remaining unconcerned with the plight of his community.

FBI Agent/Agent McCorkle – McCorkle is a casually anti-Semitic FBI agent who looks into the Roths several times over the span of a year or two, confronting each member of the family alone to ask about the political speech and activities of Alvin and, later on, of Herman. Agent McCorkle believes that the Roths' opposition to Lindbergh means that they are either organizing or taking part in a conspiracy against his administration—a sentiment which foreshadows the larger and more insidious anti-Semitic conspiracy theories that will overtake America in 1942.

Longy Zwillman – Zwillman was a real-life Jewish gangster and Prohibition-era bootlegger who was a member of East Coast racketeering's "Big Six" throughout the 1930s and 1940s. In the novel, Longy is a powerful boss who does whatever needs to be done to protect his enterprises—and the businesses from which he collects—from FBI scrutiny.

Mr. Cucuzza – Mr. Cucuzza is the patriarch of the family who moves into the apartment below the Roths' as part of the Good Neighbors program. Mr. Cucuzza, like Herman Roth, deeply opposes the spread of fascism in America, having seen what Benito Mussolini's dictatorship did to his home country of Italy. Though the Good Neighbors program has nefarious purposes, Mr. Cucuzza ultimately does prove himself to be a good neighbor—he is protective of the Roths and even lends Herman a pistol so that he can defend his family against the rising threat of anti-Semitic violence.

Benito Mussolini – Mussolini was the real-life Italian leader whose totalitarian dictatorship inspired Adolf Hitler's rise to power. Known as *Il Duce*, Mussolini founded Italian Fascism and was the leader of the National Fascist Party from 1922–1943, when he was deposed and replaced as the Axis Powers of World War II (Germany, Italy, and Japan) began to collapse. Mussolini was captured and executed in 1945.

Leo Frank – Frank was a real-life Jewish pencil factory superintendent who was convicted of the murder of a 13-year-old employee, Mary Phagan in 1913. He was lynched by a mob two years later despite overwhelming evidence that another man murdered Phagan. In 1986, Frank was posthumously pardoned by the Georgia State Board of Pardons and Paroles.

Adolf Hitler Hitler was the real-life German dictator and leader of the Nazi Party who rose to power as *Führer* in 1934, initiated World War II in Europe by invading Poland in September of 1939 and engineered the Holocaust. A fascist despot responsible for the deaths of millions—including six million European Jews who were murdered in concentration camps across Europe—Hitler's racially-motivated ideology led to the systematic large-scale slaughtering of Jews and members of numerous other political, religious, and social minorities whom he and his followers deemed *Untermenschen*, or "subhuman." Hitler committed suicide on April 30th, 1945, just two days after the death of Benito Mussolini, as Soviet troops advanced

on his residence. Hitler is universally regarded as one of history's most evil, "gravely immoral" figures.

Mr. Taylor A tour guide whom the Roths meet during their trip to Washington, D.C. Hermanand Bess are initially skeptical about hiring Mr. Taylor to take them around to the historical sites and monuments throughout the city, but after their journey gets under way—and they realize how deeply, in just a few short months, anti-Semitic sentiment has spread throughout the U.S.—they are grateful to have Mr. Taylor with them. Mr. Taylor is kind, sympathetic, and nonjudgmental. As he bears silent, painful witness to the cruel treatment the Roths receive at their hotel, at the Lincoln Memorial, and at a family diner in the District, Mr. Taylor remains calm, gentle, and helpful. While Mr. Taylor does not take a stance against anti-Semitism on the Roths' behalf, he stands beside them as an ally throughout their struggles, proving a surprising and in many ways essential part of their confusing, difficult trip.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Shushy Margulis – Margulis is one of Alvin's neighborhood friends in Newark. Shushy is a two-bit gangster who organizes crapshoots around the neighborhood and engages in minor delinquencies. Herman despises Shushy, as he's a bad influence on the vulnerable and rootless Alvin.

Niggy and Bullet Apfelbaum – The Apfelbaums are a pair of brothers who work as underlings for the notorious Jewish gangster Longy Zwillman.

The Mawhinneys – A Kentucky family who take Sandy in during his summer in Kentucky with the Just Folks program. The Mawhinneys later help the Roths to rescue Seldon from Danville in the midst of anti-Semitic riots which break out in the nearby Louisville.

Joey Cucuzza – Joey is a mischievous 11-year-old boy who moves into the apartment below the Roths' with his family as part of the Good Neighbors program. Joey harbors harmful ideas about Jews, and even confides in Philip that he believes Jews drink the blood of Gentiles.

Minna Schapp – Minna is Alvin's fiancée. She's a timid, nervous girl who is the daughter of a reformed Jewish gangster in Philadelphia.

Hermann Göring – Göring was a real-life figure who was one of the most powerful figures in the Nazi Party. He was the commander of the *Luftwaffe* (German Air Force) and the creator of the Gestapo (Nazi secret police).

Joachim von Ribbentrop – Ribbentrop was a real-life figure who was a powerful member of the Nazi Party and the Foreign Minister of Nazi Germany from 1938–1945.

Emperor Hirohito – Hirohito was the real-life 124th emperor of Japan who reigned from 1926–1947. After Japan's August 1945 surrender in World War II, Hirohito was not prosecuted for war crimes. He continued to rule the state of Japan until his death in 1989.

Rabbi Joachim Prinz – Prinz was a real-life rabbi, author, and civil rights activist who served as the rabbi of Temple B'nai Abraham in Newark from 1939–1977.

TERMS

German American Bund – The German American Bund was a German American pro-Nazi organization established in 1936 in order to promote a favorable view of Nazi Germany in the U.S. Bund rallies and parades took place across the United States throughout the 1930s, but the organization went into decline in the 1940s.

Kristallnacht – Also known as Crystal Night or "the Night of Broken Glass," *Kristallnacht* was a pogrom carried out against Jews throughout Nazi Germany on the 9th and 10th of November, 1938. The state-sanctioned violence left Jewish-owned stores, schools, homes, and synagogues ransacked and smashed, filling the streets of Jewish neighborhoods with glass that gave the terrible attacks their name. Over 267 synagogues and 7,000 Jewish businesses were destroyed, and upwards of 30,000 Jewish men were arrested and taken to concentration camps.

Gentile – In the Hebrew Bible, Gentiles are non-Jewish people. The Yiddish term for Gentiles is goyim.

Goyim – *Goyim* is a Yiddish word meaning "Gentiles" or non-Jewish people.

Office of American Absorption (OAA) – The Office of American Absorption (OAA) is a fictional office created by President **Charles Lindbergh** for the purposes of absorbing or assimilating Jews into broader American society.

Just Folks – Just Folks is a fictional "volunteer work program" created by the OAA. Just Folks places Jewish children and teens with Gentile families for the length of a summer under the guise of broadening their horizons. In reality, the Just Folks program is designed to weaken and break up Jewish families with the ultimate goal of assimilating them into Gentile culture and weakening Jewish constituencies across America.

The Good Neighbor Project – The Good Neighbor Project is a fictional OAA program which moves Gentile families and families of other ethnic and religious minorities into Jewish neighborhoods. Like all OAA programs, The Good Neighbor Project is aimed at diluting and weakening Jewish communities and constituencies.

Homestead 42 – Drawing inspiration from the Homestead Act of 1862—a piece of legislation intended to encourage westward migration by providing settlers with 160 acres of public land—the fictional Homestead 42 is enacted under the guise of encouraging Jewish families to settle in the American

West. In reality, like Just Folks, Homestead 42 is an OAA program whose goal is to break up Jewish families, weaken and dilute Jewish culture, and decimate the power of Jewish constituencies across America.

Iceland Understanding – The Iceland Understanding is a fictional document signed by **Lindbergh** and **Hitler** during a meeting in Iceland. The fictional document declares that the U.S., in exchange for immunity from the Nazis' encroachment, will stay out of the war in Europe and allow Hitler's armies to conquer Europe with impunity.

Hawaii Understanding – The Hawaii Understanding is a fictional document signed by **Lindbergh** and powerful emissaries of Japan's **Emperor Hirohito** in Hawaii just after the **Iceland Understanding** is drawn up with **Hitler**. The Hawaii Understanding extends the same leniency to the Japanese Axis powers as the Iceland Understanding does to the Nazis.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

JEWISH IDENTITY VS. ASSIMILATION

At the heart of *The Plot Against America* is an exploration of what it means to identify not just as a Jew, but as an American Jew. In Philip Roth's auto-fictional alternate history, America elects the aviation-hero-cum-Nazi-sympathizer Charles Lindbergh as president in November of 1940, unseating Franklin Delano Roosevelt and installing an isolationist, anti-Semitic government in the White House. Over the years that follow, the young Philip and his family watch helplessly as anti-Semitism takes hold of America, as the Lindbergh administration enacts relocation policies for Jewish families, and as government-sanctioned assimilation programs aimed at young Jewish people become part of daily life. Ultimately, Roth suggests that Jewish identity in America is jeopardized by the pressure to put one's identity as an American over one's identity as a Jewish person, or to assimilate oneself and one's family into a more mainstream, palatable version of the Jewish identity.

As the novel unfolds, Roth investigates what it means to his characters to be American Jews—and how that meaning changes as the fictionalized America of Roth's imagination slides further into fascism and anti-Semitism. "America is our only homeland. Our religion is independent of any piece of land other than this great country… […] I want Charles Lindbergh to be my president not in spite of my being a Jew but because I am a Jew—an American Jew," says the controversial New Jersey-based Rabbi Lionel Bengelsdorf in a speech endorsing Lindbergh early on in the novel. Bengelsdorf is the character in the novel most willing to abide by assimilationist policies. A Jewish man from South Carolina, the rabbi is the leader of a large Newark congregation and a prominent figurehead of the Jewish community there—yet he is a controversial man whom many Jewish people see as self-hating or at the very least self-denying due to his endorsement of and closeness to Lindbergh. When Philip's aunt Evelyn, his mother Bess's sister, becomes engaged to the rabbi, the Roths find themselves welcoming Bengelsdorf into their home—and listening to his lengthy speeches about the singularity of American Jews and the "great opportunity" they have to "participate fully in the national life of their country" without "dwell[ing] apart" from mainstream society. Bengelsdorf is an accessory to the Lindbergh administration—and as such, he takes it upon himself to spread messages encouraging assimilation and fealty to the American "homeland" among his congregation, his neighborhood, and even his extended family. Whether Bengelsdorf truly believes the things he says is a fact which Roth leaves open to interpretation—but what is clear is that Bengelsdorf disseminates dangerous stereotypes about Jewish people as existing "apart" from and refusing to "participate" in society. These falsehoods have been used against Jewish people around the world throughout history—and they were, of course, an important tool of the Nazis in justifying their "final solution" to the "Jewish problem" in Europe. Roth uses Bengelsdorf's acceptance and encouragement of assimilationist policies to foreshadow the larger turns still to come for the Roths and all the Jews of America under the Lindbergh administration.

With the creation of the Office of American Absorption (OAA), more Jewish families find themselves faced with forced assimilation. When the OAA creates the Just Folks program with the aim of relocating young Jewish children to farms in America's heartlands for extended periods of time, the Roths find themselves contending with the threat of assimilation. Philip's older brother Sandy excitedly takes the chance to spend a summer working on a farm in Kentucky—when he returns, he speaks with a country accent and extols the simplicity of country life. He starts referring to his family as "you people" and speaking about "Jews" as if he is not a Jew himself, declaring his contempt for his family's cultural and religious life. Sandy is a young teenager—as such, he is at an impressionable age. The Lindbergh administration taps into this fact by aiming their Just Folks program at young Jewish people who may harbor frustrations with their parents, with their religious lives, or with their own identities, using those frustrations and insecurities to assimilate young Jewish people and to detach them from their cultural lives. Roth demonstrates the fractures that Sandy's self-loathing and newfound emotional and cultural distance from his family cause—and thus foreshadow the further measures the Lindbergh administration will soon take

after the success of its exploratory programs. In 1942, the administration enacts Homestead 42, a new version of the Homestead Act of 1862—a piece of legislation which was meant to encourage westward migration by providing settlers with 160 acres of land. Homestead 42 is meant to offer "relocation opportunities" for Jewish families, moving them to the rural interior of the country. Philip's parents recognize the legislation for what it is: an attempt to break up Jewish communities around the country, isolate Jewish Americans, and thus encourage assimilation into the American mainstream. Homestead 42 is the legislation which clues Philip's family and those around them in their Jewish community into the fact that the new administration is well on its way to dividing up Jewish communities around the country. It's essentially forcing American Jews to detach themselves from their cultural and religious centers, from their neighbors and family members, and from the traditions and gatherings that define secular cultural Judaism in America. Roth's indictment of such measures is not just limited to the fictional events to the novel—by using these fictional scenarios, Roth more broadly decries the idea that American Jews must blend in or forgo their long-held rituals and traditions in order to truly be a part of American society.

In Roth's imagination, the "unadulterated loyalty [...] to the United States of America" that characters like Bengelsdorf express is at best a survival tactic and at worst a symptom of assimilationist rhetoric's brainwashing potential. Roth uses *The Plot Against America* to metaphorize the constant choice that Jewish Americans must face: whether to swear fealty to a "homeland" that only wants an assimilated version of them, or whether to stand tall in their people's history, traditions, and legacy of community and resistance.

ISOLATIONISM VS. SOLIDARITY

When Charles Lindbergh takes the presidency as a Republican candidate in Philip Roth's fictionalized version of the 1940 U.S. election, he runs on an anti-war, "America First" platform, determined to make sure that America stays out of World War II and to keep American lives from being lost in what Lindbergh claims to see as a European squabble. Seen as a staunch defender of American lives, Lindbergh's popularity soars—yet his isolationist policies, his diplomatic meetings and signed agreements with Adolf Hitler himself, and his simmering anti-Semitism worry many Democrats and American Jews. As the novel unfolds, Lindbergh's support of American isolationism successfully keeps Americans out of the war—but it leads to nothing short of a de facto alliance with Nazi Germany and a surrender to Hitler's thirst for global dominion. Ultimately, Roth uses his alternate history of 1940s America in order to warn against the dangers of isolationism and to argue that the world must always stand in solidarity against evil.

As *The Plot Against America* unfolds, Philip Roth showcases his alternate America's descent into isolationism through the eyes of a Jewish family terrified by their country's lack of solidarity with the Jews of Europe. In showing how horrified the Roths and their neighbors are at the very idea of American isolationism, Roth implicitly condemns the instinct to selfishly protect oneself at the cost of doing what is right. The first character to rebel against the Lindbergh administration's "America First" isolationist policies is Philip's older cousin Alvin—the orphaned son of Philip's father, Herman's, brother who lives with the Roths as their ward. Alvin, furious with the direction his country has taken, flees to Canada, enlists in the army, and, within months, is sent back home from Europe after losing most of his left leg in a battle. Alvin returns home emaciated, traumatized, and reliant on the use of a **prosthetic leg**—but he's nonetheless stoically proud of what he's done. Though others, such as Rabbi Bengelsdorf, insist there was no need for Alvin to join the Canadian Army and make such a sacrifice, Roth uses Alvin's story to make a profound point about the dangers of isolationism and the importance of solidarity. Alvin could have stayed in Newark forever, gone to college on his employer's dime, and proceeded along the conventional, middle-class path laid out for him—but instead, he chooses to make a huge sacrifice and go off to war to fight for what he believes in and against what he cannot accept. Roth uses what happens to Alvin to show that even when there is great personal cost, it is of the utmost importance for those who can to stand up for what is right. Alvin's disgust with the idea of American isolationism—and America's collaboration with the Nazis in order to secure exemption from a war being fought against the ultimate evil the Nazis represent—functions to refute the temptation that Lindbergh and his administration created to do what is easy rather than what is right.

Another instance in which Roth examines the struggle between isolationism and solidarity—and simultaneously ties this struggle to the rapidly escalating anti-Semitism within American government and society alike—comes about midway through the novel, when young Philip describes the activities of the German American Bund in the middle months of 1942. At Bund rallies, "the deep fascist fellowship" of Nazi sympathizers gather in public places like Madison Square Garden and wave banners reading "Smash Jewish Communists!" and "KEEP AMERICA OUT OF THE JEWISH WAR." Roth uses this instance to show how Nazi sympathizers see World War II as "the Jewish war"—and view any involvement in the crisis as frivolous and unnecessary, given their hatred of Jews. This passage suggests that many Americans—and more with each passing day under Lindbergh's presidency—see Jews as communists, agitators, and fringe members of society whose wellbeing (or lack thereof) should not influence the actions taken by or the directives assigned to "mainstream" Gentile society. American isolationism under Lindbergh, then, is inextricably tied to a lack of solidarity with the Jews of the

world borne out of a refusal to see Jewish people as real members of society.

Throughout the novel, Roth openly condemns the isolationist, nationalist policies of Charles Lindbergh—and, in so doing, condemns the ways in which those ideologies have streaked their ways through real, contemporary American politics and policy. By providing an alternate history of the early 1940s and America's involvement in World War II, Philip Roth demonstrates the dangers of nationalism and isolationism while showing how important it is for a country—or even an individual—to always stand in solidarity with the side of good and fight for what's right. Roth ultimately suggests that to put one's head in the sand and look out only for oneself, whether on a personal or global level, is to blatantly allow evil to flourish.

HISTORICAL FACT VS. EMOTIONAL TRUTH

Philip Roth himself has declared that he wanted to write *The Plot Against America* to explore a series of "what-ifs"—and to get to the bottom of what horrors could be possible in a version of America that became openly hostile to Jews at the modern pinnacle of Jewish suffering around the world. Roth creates an alternate history—one in which Charles Lindbergh, who may or may not be a puppet of the Third Reich, is elected president in November of 1940 and begins enacting isolationist, anti-Semitic policies in the United States. Though the historical record as readers know it and Roth's alternate history are very different, he ultimately argues that the lived emotional truths of Jewish Americans, defined by ostracism and uncertainty, are very much the same in both timelines.

By imagining how American Jews might react to the encroachment of fascism or to more flagrant daily displays of anti-Semitism, Roth uses a heightened reality to shine a light on the worst possible timeline of American history. While the history Roth writes in *The Plot Against America* is false, he uses his reshuffle of the historical record to explore the deeper emotional truths of Jewish American lives—lives which have long been defined by the experience of being othered and the fear of being persecuted for that otherness. When Lindbergh is first elected to the presidency, the Roth family and their Jewish neighbors in Newark immediately know that things will soon take a turn for the worse. On the campaign trail, Lindbergh made disparaging remarks about Jewish people and went so far to suggest that Jewish people—an "other" kind of people—would "lead [America] to destruction" should they result in America's joining the war through their enormous but underhanded "influence" on society. "All the Jews could do [after Lindbergh's election] was worry," Philip recalls—in the streets and in the schools, young and old members of the Jewish community in Newark begin whispering about what might happen to them in the months to come. Even as his parents, Herman and Bess, try to convince Philip and his brother Sandy that everything is still normal, young Philip begins dreaming of his beloved **stamp collection** defaced by swastikas, demonstrating the lingering fear in the back of his mind that has recently been activated and exacerbated by the swift shift in word events. Roth knows it isn't hard to imagine what would happen in America's small Jewish communities in the event of an anti-Semite being elected to the presidency—and as he unspools the Roths' reactions, he shows that for many Jewish Americans, a lack of preparedness for disaster is simply not an option. By opening up a new timeline of American history, Roth demonstrates how Lindbergh's election seems to somehow confirm what the Roths and countless families like them have always feared about life in America but have long attempted to ignore or suppress in order to simply carry on. Jewish people all across America know about the anti-Semitic underbelly of society—and when Lindbergh's election allows that nefarious underbelly to surface, Roth acknowledges with both sadness and anger the truths about America that Jewish people living there have always known but have tried to ignore: that their acceptance in the United States is conditional and precarious.

As the novel continues on, Roth shows the Roth family reel as they personally fend off anti-Semitism. They're the target of openly anti-Semitic remarks from strangers on a trip to Washington; they worry as they send Sandy off to an Office of American Absorption-helmed program called Just Folks, which relocates Jewish children to farms across America for several weeks; and they begin making plans to move to Canada should America fall to the Nazis—an idea that was once unthinkable just months prior to the start of the novel. With each new horror, the Roths wonder how their country could have become so unrecognizable in such a short span of time—yet at the same time, their swift preparedness and their networks of whispering and planning with friends and neighbors demonstrates that even before such a turn of events, their family unit and larger community has almost been expecting a new era of open prejudice, cruelty, and even violence against Jewish people. As the novel unfolds, Roth reveals a secret of mid-century (and, to some extent, contemporary) Jewish life in America to his readers: that even as Jewish families participate in their communities and form friendships and business alliances with Gentiles, there is always the threat of sudden emotional or physical exile from those communities. Roth suggests that the emotional truths the Roths and their neighbors must face as the events of *The Plot Against America* continue to play out are not very far from the emotional truths that ordinary Jewish families living in the real America harbor—and that the trauma of centuries of oppression, expulsion, and othering have left an indelible mark on the Jewish communities not just of the novel's timeline, but of our own.

The Plot Against America is a bold novel, one which rewrites a

major episode of American history in order to examine the failures of American solidarity, the vulnerability of Jewish families in a "homeland" that accepts them only conditionally, and the gifts (and pitfalls) of life in a family unit. By distorting historical facts, Roth counterintuitively gets at deeper emotional truths—he uses what did not happen to investigate what *could* happen any time. By introducing his readers to an alternate concept of American history, Roth illuminates not only the differences, but the intense and often unsettling similarities, between fact and fiction.

FAMILY AND HOME

Philip Roth chose to set *The Plot Against America* in his hometown of Newark—and to use the real names and, to some extent, biographies of his family members as he drew the characters who would populate the novel, installing a younger version of himself as the book's narrator and protagonist. In doing so, Roth examines an environment he knows intimately as he shows how the Roth family navigates a time of great social, political, and emotional turbulence. By investigating how the Roth family is placed under intense pressure by the uncertainty of wartime and the looming specter of anti-Semitism, Roth ultimately argues that "a family is both peace and war"—in other words, the members of a family unit can act as one another's most important allies or most devastating enemies.

Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* consists of an alternate history not just of 1940s America, but of his own family. Roth uses the journeys of three major characters to show how members of a single family might grow to resent one another or even betray one another in times of intense uncertainty or under extreme duress. The first major character to struggle with betrayal and resentment of and toward his family is Alvin, the Roths' "ward" and the orphaned son of Herman's older brother. Alvin, an older teenager, flees to Canada shortly after Lindbergh's election to fight for the British in Europe—but just a few months into his service, he loses a leg in battle and is sent home. Alvin is emaciated, broken, and alone in figuring out how to move through the world on his new **prosthetic leg** while contending with a stump that constantly "breaks down," leaving him vulnerable to wounds and infections. As the months and years go by, Alvin becomes a gangster and moves to Philadelphia, which enrages Herman and leads to horrible emotional and physical fighting between them, even as they should come together in sorrow and solidarity as Lindbergh's administration tightens its grip on the American Jews. Alvin's journey is significant in many ways. The Roths are, at the start of the novel, a safe harbor for Alvin—they represent "peace" in the wake of his parents' deaths, and though he resents his own losses, he more or less fits in. After defying Herman and running away to Canada only to return permanently disabled, Alvin resents Herman more directly and even claims that Herman is the one who pushed him into joining up with his endless rants against Lindbergh. Alvin seeks to defy his family and make "war" with them even in a turbulent time—he destroys the safe haven of home and chooses a series of difficult paths which alienate him from his family. His failures to make a difference in the war against Germany result in his waging war against his own family.

The second major character to betray his family's love and values is Sandy, Philip's older brother. Sandy's early fascination with Lindbergh signals that he feels different from the rest of his family—rather than being repulsed by Lindbergh's anti-Semitic speeches and coziness with Hitler himself, Sandy admires Lindbergh's feats as an aviator and keeps secret drawings of him beneath his bed. Sandy enrolls in the Just Folks program and spends a summer living in Kentucky with a Gentile family—when he returns, he speaks with an accent and dreams of leaving his family behind and returning to the heartland of America. Sandy alienates himself not just from his family by referring to Jews as "you people" or "you Jews" and suggesting that he himself is not a Jew any longer. Sandy's betrayal is rooted in an exhaustion with the burdens of being Jewish in America—and thus the burden of being considered the other in America. Sandy admires Lindbergh and dreams of a simpler life not marked by any difference from the rest of his country. He is lulled by the idea of simplicity and social ease—so much so that he seeks to turn his family upside down and go to "war" with his parents, just as Alvin does, over his identity, his choices, and his hopes for the future.

Evelyn, Bess's sister and Sandy and Philip's aunt, is the third major character who wages war against her family. When Evelyn becomes engaged—and later married—to the controversial Rabbi Bengelsdorf, Bess and Herman are perturbed but not angry. As Evelyn's behavior continues to change, however, and as she accompanies her new husband to a state dinner hosting Hitler's minister for foreign affairs, her family becomes incapable of supporting her choices any longer. Sandy and Philip remain drawn to Aunt Evelyn and her glamorous lifestyle—but by the end of the novel, after Lindbergh disappears and Bengelsdorf is taken into FBI custody, Evelyn is more alone and isolated from her family than ever before. She insists that Bengelsdorf knew of a Nazi conspiracy to install Lindbergh to the presidency as a puppet leader by blackmailing him with his stolen son, Charles Jr.—presumed dead in the 1930s but in fact alive and well, touted as a poster child of Aryan superiority in Nazi Germany. Evelyn is deemed crazy by most of her family, and the rifts she has created are impossible to mend. Evelyn essentially sells out her identity and her religion—and thus, by extension, her family and its values—for access to wealth and power. She fraternizes with Nazis, knowing all the while the truth of what is happening to America and the dark bargain Lindbergh has made. Evelyn resents her family's ordinariness and longs for more, and she

betrays them (and indeed herself) in pursuit of it. Roth shows how Evelyn wages war on her family much like Sandy does, by forgetting where she has come from and prioritizing an erasure of the otherness her Jewishness represents over the values in which she was raised.

By suggesting that a family can be either a source of peace or war, Roth argues that in complicated times, family members have only one another to cling to. By the same token, however, he also suggests that families can find that the influences of the outside world—especially a turbulent or dangerous one—often exacerbate and heighten the small, everyday "wars" that comprise life within a family unit, making harmony and togetherness in the face of danger all the more difficult.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

ALVIN'S PROSTHESIS

Philip's cousin Alvin's prosthesis symbolizes a lack of support in times of crisis. Early on in the novel, Alvin is angered by the isolationist policies of the new American president Charles Lindbergh—and he's exasperated by the idea of pursuing a conventional education or a conventional job in a time of such huge turbulence. Rather than sit idly by while anti-Semitism grips America, Alvin runs off to Canada to conscript in the Canadian Army and fight with the British against Hitler in the European theater of World War II. Just months later, the Roths receive word that Alvin, their ward, has been injured in battle and will be coming home—he has lost a leg. The Alvin who returns is different from the fiery Alvin who left for Canada—muted, embarrassed, and emaciated, Alvin is learning how to live with his new disability slowly but surely. Alvin has been fitted with a prosthesis—but while the prosthetic leg given to him allows him to be mobile, it also creates a lot of problems when issues with its fit leave Alvin's stump raw, bleeding, and covered in new wounds. The continual cycles of relief and pain Alvin suffers as the result of his imperfect prosthesis come to serve as a symbol of the failures of the support systems people count on in times of crisis.

As the political situation in America worsens, the Roths struggle to protect and support one another, as well as their friends and neighbors—and often, they fail to do so. Living in terrifying, unprecedented times makes support and solidarity difficult to provide or, for that matter, to accept. And as the novel unfolds, Alvin's continual need to abstain from his prosthesis while he heals his wounds before carefully, slowly returning to his reliance on it is an external representation of the delicate balance of familial, societal, and political systems of support and solidarity. At the end of the novel, when Philip's family takes in the orphaned Seldon Wishnow, Philip sees his broken school friend as a stump—and Philip describes himself as "the prosthesis" which, however ineffectively or imperfectly, serves to prop Seldon up for several years throughout his turbulent childhood. The relationship between stump and prosthesis imprints itself upon Philip, who helps take care of Alvin when he returns from war. It eventually comes to inform the ways in which Philip sees his own responsibility to giving support where he can—even when he feels overwhelmed, overburdened, and imperfect.

PHILIP'S STAMPS

Philip's stamp collection represents the desire to protect that which cannot be protected. Philip, the narrator and protagonist, is only seven years old at the start of the novel—and as news of rising anti-Semitism and fascist sympathies in America begin to reach him, he internalizes and reacts to the threat very differently than the rest of his family. While Philip's parents, Bess and Herman, express concrete worries about violence or threats against their family, Philip feels a nebulous sense of uncertainty which manifests as a desire to protect his precious stamp collection. Shortly after Charles Lindbergh secures the Republican nomination at the end of the first chapter of the novel, set in June 1940, Philip has a nightmare so intense it catapults him out of bed. Upon waking, he remembers a terrible dream in which he saw all of his stamps defaced with large black swastikas. Philip's stamps, then, emerge as a symbol of the desire to protect what's precious—and the fear of being unable to do so.

Further, Philip's stamps are a symbol of his obsession with Americana and his belief that the emblems of his country—images of its past leaders and national parks, images which every good American knows by heart—are sacred. When Lindbergh's candidacy (and eventual ascent to the presidency) brings simmering anti-Semitic sentiments throughout America to the surface, Philip realizes that as a Jewish boy, his status as an American is conditional—he is not, according to the fascist anti-Semites who soon hold political and social power in America, as American as his Gentile counterparts, and he must learn to reckon with that terrible fact at a young and tender age. Philip fears the "malignant transformation" of his stamps throughout the novel, and in this way, his anxiety about the stamps' wellbeing serves as a method of deflecting his fears about his and his family's safety and capacity for "transformation" into something unrecognizable. Later on in the novel, when Philip loses his stamp collection while running away from home, Roth uses the loss of the stamps to symbolize Philip's loss of faith in the value and virtue of America as a whole.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *The Plot Against America* published in 2005.

Chapter 1 Quotes

"Alvin's going to go to Canada and join the Canadian army," he said. "He's going to fight for the British against Hitler."

"But nobody can beat Roosevelt," I said.

"Lindbergh's going to. America's going to go fascist."

Then we just stood there together under the intimidating spell of the three portraits [of Lindbergh.]

Related Characters: Philip Roth, Sanford "Sandy" Roth (speaker), Adolf Hitler , Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR), Charles Lindbergh, Alvin Roth

Related Themes:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

In the first chapter of Philip Roth's alternate-history novel *The Plot Against America*, the Republican Party runs Charles Lindbergh—an American aviation hero and Nazi sympathizer—against Franklin Delano Roosevelt in the presidential election of 1940. The Roth family and their Jewish neighbors in Newark, New Jersey watch helplessly as Americans all over the country become convinced that Lindbergh's America-first, anti-war point of view is the right way forward. In this passage, Philp's older brother, Sandy (a talented young artist who has long been a huge fan of Lindbergh's exploits) warns Philip that America is going to "go fascist" with Lindbergh at its helm—even as he finds himself under the "spell" of his own pencil drawings of Lindbergh.

This passage foreshadows the events to come and engages the novel's thematic concern of how to prioritize one's faith in relation to one's country. Sandy, despite being a young Jewish boy, is enraptured by Lindbergh, a man whose policies will soon impinge upon the rights of Jews all over America. Sandy and Philip worry about their cousin, Alvin, who wants to go off and fight Nazis even as America explores an isolationist point of view. This passage also highlights the tensions and competing desires and senses of identity that exist within the Roth household—it is socially forbidden for Sandy to admire Lindbergh, yet he clearly idolizes the man and prioritizes that idolatry over his own Jewish identity. By portraying this small, ordinary slice of conversation between two very different brothers, Roth begins setting up the major obstacles that young Philip and his family will encounter over the course of the novel.

Harmless enough, and yet it drove some of the mothers crazy who had to hear us at it for hours on end through their open windows. "Can't you kids do something else? Can't you find another game to play?" But we couldn't—declaring war was all we thought about too.

Related Characters: Philip Roth (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the older Philip describes his and his neighborhood playmates' obsession with a game called "I Declare War"—an afternoon diversion that is exactly what it sounds like. By pretending to be different countries and declaring war upon one another, Philip and his neighborhood friends—who are all young Jewish boys—demonstrate their latent, underlying fears about the war that has gripped much of the globe. The boys can't think of anything else but the fighting abroad and how it might come to affect their lives. This passage demonstrates how acutely aware Philip and his Jewish friends are of the conflict in Europe—and of the suffering of European Jews in particular. Thoughts of war slowly take over the thoughts and lives not just of Philip and his friends, but of their parents and indeed the entire Jewish community of Newark over the course of the novel. As such, Roth shows how in spite of Lindbergh's isolationist stance, there is no keeping World War II out of America's collective consciousness.

"I am here," Rabbi Bengelsdorf [said,] "to crush all doubt of the unadulterated loyalty of the American Jews to the United States of America. […] America is our beloved homeland. America is our only homeland. Our religion is independent of any piece of land other than this great country, to which, now as always, we commit our total devotion and allegiance as the proudest of citizens. I want Charles Lindbergh to be my president not in spite of my being a Jew but because I am a Jew—an *American* Jew."

Related Characters: Rabbi Lionel Bengelsdorf (speaker),

Charles Lindbergh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35-36

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Rabbi Lionel Bengelsdorf—a controversial figure within the Jewish community of Newark—offers up his endorsement of Charles Lindbergh. Bengelsdorf ignores—and thus tacitly excuses—Lindbergh's anti-Semitism and destructive, nationalistic isolationism, insisting that "American Jews" are loyal to America before their own identities as Jewish people. In this passage, Bengelsdorf invokes many of the stereotypes that have been used against Jews in the past—namely the idea that Jews are not true citizens of whatever country they inhabit because their loyalty is to some other "homeland," ideology, or community.

Bengelsdorf insists that, as an American Jew, he is loyal to the American homeland above all else—a stance that angers and perturbs the Roths and many of their friends and neighbors as they listen to Bengelsdorf's speech on their radios. This passage is an early example of Roth illustrating the idea that for many Jews—in America and abroad, in both this fictional timeline and in the true historical record—the emotional truth of a life defined by fear, instability, and knowledge of the constant suspicion of others is just as crushing as the idea of life under a nationalist, isolationist, white supremacist regime.

❝ It was when I looked next at the album's facing page to see what, if anything, had happened to my 1934 National Parks set of ten that I fell out of the bed and woke up on the floor, this time screaming. […] Across the face of each, […] across everything in America that was the bluest and the greenest and the whitest and to be preserved forever in these pristine reservations, was printed a black swastika.

Related Characters: Philip Roth (speaker), Sanford "Sandy" Roth

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Philip recalls waking up from a horrible nightmare in which he opened his beloved stamp collection to find that the image on each stamp depicting a famous American landmark had been defaced with a large black swastika. This deeply symbolic dream demonstrates the ways in which the relatively new threat of impending war—combined with the omnipresent, deep-seated threat of anti-Semitism—wreaks havoc on the psyches not just of young Philip but indeed of his Jewish family members, friends, and neighbors.

Throughout the novel, Philip's stamps function as a symbol of the desire for a normal, American life—and the worship of Americana—which Philip and his brother Sandy espouse. Their Jewishness is a direct threat to those wants, and, over the course of the novel, the boys will (in different ways and to different degrees) rebel against their religious identity—an identity which marks them as different and, to many Gentile Americans, as suspect. At the same time, even in dreams, the boys cannot escape the knowledge that their family's way of life and indeed their entire country's dignity and autonomy is under a very real threat.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ "All families go through a lot. A family is both peace and war. We're going through a little war right now."

Related Characters: Herman Roth (speaker), Alvin Roth

Related Themes:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, Herman Roth declares that "a family is both peace and war" as he tries to reason with his discontented nephew Alvin, who longs to run off to Canada so that he can fight with the British against the Nazis. Herman tries to quell Alvin's anger at the world—and his anger with his family for holding him back from what he sees as the only moral thing to do—by reminding him that all families have the capacity for both peace and war, and that "a little war" within one's family doesn't necessitate drastic action. Herman's words will prove a defining directive for the novel as Philip Roth investigates the fissures and fractures that develop within a fictionalized version of his own family during World War II. By demonstrating how the Roth family's decisions devastate and divide them over the course of a global conflict—one which threatens their family's cohesiveness and identity in other ways as well—Roth shows how family members can alternately

wound and heal one another, acting as a battleground or a sanctuary.

> We had driven right to the very heart of American history, and whether we knew it in so many words, it was American history, delineated in its most inspirational form, that we were counting on to protect us against Lindbergh.

Related Characters: Philip Roth (speaker), Charles Lindbergh, Sanford "Sandy" Roth, Bess Roth, Herman Roth

Related Themes:

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

The Roths take a family trip to Washington, D.C. to explore the nation's capital together. The trip is a bid for maintaining normalcy even in the face of Charles Lindbergh's election as President of the U.S.—even as an open anti-Semite takes control of America, the Roths try their best to remain optimistic about American history's ability to "protect" them and families like them from Lindbergh and his nationalistic, isolationist administration. However, the trip is a colossal failure: over the course of their stay in the capital, the Roths are shouted at by anti-Semites, kicked out of their hotel after management discovers they are Jewish, and harassed in public time and time again even as they travel among monuments with a Gentile (non-Jewish) tour guide, Mr. Taylor. The Roths hope that by reflecting on American history they will feel comforted and shielded—instead, a few days in the heart of the nation's capital reminds them only of America's long legacy of white supremacy, cruelty, and indifference in the face of the suffering of its most vulnerable.

> It was from there that we heard him refer to my father as "a loudmouth Jew," followed a moment later by the elderly lady declaring, "I'd give anything to slap his face."
>
> Mr. Taylor led us quickly away to a smaller hall just off the main chamber where there was a tablet inscribed with the Gettysburg Address and a mural whose theme was the Emancipation.
>
> "To hear words like that in a place like this," said my father, his choked voice quivering with indignation. "In a shrine to a man like this!"

Related Characters: Herman Roth, Philip Roth (speaker), Mr. Taylor, Charles Lindbergh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Roths and their tour guide, Mr. Taylor, are visiting the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. As the Roths marvel at the massive statue of Lincoln—and as Herman audibly expresses his distress at the idea of Lindbergh inheriting the legacy of such a man—two other tourists decry and harass them using anti-Semitic language and stereotypes. As Mr. Taylor hurries the Roths away from their verbal assailants, the irony of being so cruelly treated "in a place like this" hits Herman, making him upset and emotional.

The Roths—and countless Jewish families like them—have long tried to ignore the anti-Semitic underbelly of America and convince themselves that the principles of American individualism and equality make America an ideal "homeland" for Jewish people. To be confronted with the idea that this ideology has been a lie is painful for Herman, who, like his sons Sandy and Philip, possesses a certain reverence for Americana. Again and again throughout the novel, the Roths will together and individually confront the ways in which their nation has failed them and their people, contending with the dark presence of anti-Semitism and the uncomfortable, frightening truths that simmer just under the surface of Jewish life in America.

Chapter 3 Quotes

> "An independent destiny for America"—that was the phrase Lindbergh repeated some fifteen times in his State of the Union speech and again at the close of his address on the night of June 22. When I asked my father to explain what the words meant [...] he frowned and said, "It means turning our back on our friends. It means making friends with their enemies. You know what it means, son? It means destroying everything that America stands for."

Related Characters: Herman Roth, Philip Roth (speaker), Charles Lindbergh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 84

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, a distressed Philip talks with his father shortly after the newly-inaugurated president Charles Lindbergh's first State of the Union address. Herman, a staunch believer in the promises of America, is open about his disgust with Lindbergh's "America first" policies and his nationalist, isolationist stance on America's duty to the world—or lack thereof. This passage illustrates Herman's profound belief in solidarity over isolationism: he believes that an isolationist stance is akin to the country "turning our back on our friends." By staying out of World War II, Herman and many others like him believe that America is essentially abandoning those in need and sacrificing "everything [it] stands for" in exchange for a false promise of peace. Compromising with Nazis is, to Herman and to countless American Jews, the ultimate betrayal of American ideology—and as the novel progresses, Roth will examine how Lindbergh's isolationist policies effectively destroy the moral fabric of American society.

❝ "The Jews of America […] are unlike any other community of Jews in the history of the world. […] The Jews of America can participate fully in the national life of their country. They need no longer dwell apart, a pariah community separated from the rest."

Related Characters: Rabbi Lionel Bengelsdorf (speaker), Charles Lindbergh, Philip Roth, Aunt Evelyn

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 106-107

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Rabbi Lionel Bengelsdorf, who has recently become engaged to Philip's aunt Evelyn, visits the Roth house for the first time for a family dinner. Over the meal, the conversation turns to the current political atmosphere—and Bengelsdorf spouts his controversial ideology to the Roths. Bengelsdorf evokes harmful stereotypes that have been used against Jews for centuries as he extols the idea that "the Jews of America" are singular among their brethren—by stereotyping Jewish communities as insular and separate, he engages with and adopts as his own the language of white supremacist oppressors like those hiding in plain sight within the Lindbergh administration. This passage shows just how deeply Bengelsdorf is willing to betray his own people in pursuit of power and clout; he is prepared to use harmful rhetoric against his own people (and indeed, those who are soon to become his own family) in order to secure his position as a mouthpiece of the powerful.

❝ We never followed anybody we thought was Jewish. They didn't interest us. Our curiosity was directed at men, the adult Christian men who worked all day in downtown Newark. Where did they go when they went home?

Related Characters: Philip Roth (speaker), Charles Lindbergh, Earl Axman

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 116

Explanation and Analysis

In chapter three of *The Plot Against America*, Philip and his friend Earl Axman take up a peculiar hobby: they begin following Christians throughout the greater Newark area as they depart from work and head home each day. The boys follow Christian businessmen (and occasionally Christian housewives) throughout their commutes home out of a strange and ineffable curiosity: the boys want to see how Gentiles (non-Jews) live. Roth uses Philip and Earl's strange adventures to show how these young Jewish boys harbor a dark and compelling need to know what life is like on the other side of the cultural divide that they now feel more starkly than ever before. The Lindbergh administration has given rise to more pronounced anti-Semitism throughout the country, and as word of the persecution and slaughter of European Jews reaches the United States, confused and frightened boys like Philip and Earl seek to get to the bottom of what, if anything, makes them so different from their neighbors.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ "Alvin can't bear your president," my father replied, "that's why he went to Canada. Not so long ago you couldn't bear the man either. But now this anti-Semite is your friend. The Depression is over, all you rich Jews tell me, and thanks not to Roosevelt but to Mr. Lindbergh. The stock market is up, profits are up, business is booming—and why? Because we have Lindbergh's peace instead of Roosevelt's war."

Related Characters: Uncle Monty, Alvin Roth, Herman Roth (speaker), Aunt Evelyn, Bess Roth, Philip Roth, Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR), Charles Lindbergh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 124

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Philip's father Herman and Herman's brother Monty discuss Alvin's decision to join the Canadian Army and fight for the British in Europe. Herman excoriates his brother for relaxing into a resigned acceptance of "Lindbergh's peace." Herman, who tried to prevent Alvin from joining the army, now sides with his wayward nephew. He is disgusted with the behavior of his friends, neighbors, and indeed family members like Monty and Bess's sister Evelyn who have come to accept Lindbergh's leadership because of the financial upswing and the ill-begotten peace his election has ensured.

This passage is significant because it shows the divisions that exist within one family even in a time of "peace"—though the nation has not entered the war in Europe, other "wars" have broken out on the home front as families, neighborhoods, and groups of people who should be standing in solidarity squabble among themselves. For Jewish families, especially, the tradeoffs of the era they now find themselves living in are extreme. Though war and strife have not come to America, Lindbergh's willingness to negotiate with the Nazis—the regime slaughtering Jews throughout Europe in pursuit of a white ethnostate—has created outrage in some while providing others with a false sense of reassurance. "Lindbergh's peace," then, is worthless to countless Jewish men and women who know that their country's relative "peace" is being traded for the lives of millions of their brethren overseas.

"Is it healed?" I asked him.

"Not yet."

"How long will it take?"

"Forever," he replied.

I was stunned. Then this is endless! I thought.

"Extremely frustrating," Alvin said. "You get on the leg they make for you and the stump breaks down. You get on crutches and it starts to swell up. The stump goes bad whatever you do."

Related Characters: Alvin Roth, Philip Roth (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 136-137

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Philip, who has been caring for his cousin Alvin since Alvin returned from the war in Europe missing most of his left leg, asks Alvin about when his malformed, painful stump will heal. Alvin replies that the stump will never heal, and he goes on to describe the struggles he'll continue to face all his life as a result of its continual breakdowns. As Alvin talks, his speech takes on a profound symbolic significance. Alvin is describing not only the physical nature of his injuries, but the forecast of their psychological impacts as well—and he's also speaking more largely to the cyclical, recurring nature of the traumas that members of the Jewish diaspora face. Confronted with continual rejection from country after country and neighborhood after neighborhood, Jewish people have been forced to make do with the paltry, often painful lots they're dealt. Alvin's prosthesis is a potent symbol of the failures of family, community, politicians, and world solidarity to provide systems which shelter the most vulnerable and repair the most broken.

Chapter 5 Quotes

Gone were the wall banners proclaiming "Wake up America—Smash Jewish Communists!" [...] and the big white buttons with the black lettering that had been distributed to Bund members to stick into their lapels, the buttons that read:

KEEP AMERICA
OUT OF
THE JEWISH WAR

Related Characters: Philip Roth (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 176-177

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Philip describes a meeting of the German American Bund, an infamous pro-Nazi organization. Though at this meeting, which takes place in the early 1940s, the Bund's anti-Semitic banners and buttons calling for the "smash[ing]" of Jews and blaming Europe's war on Jewish people are gone, Philip remembers in great detail pictures and newsreels he's seen of prior Bund rallies. The anti-Jewish messaging is burned indelibly into his memory—it is a constant reminder that a sizable portion of white,

Christian America blames Jews at home and around the world for the war and casts them as communists, agitators, and traitors to their own homeland.

Rather than stand in solidarity with the Jews of Europe who are being slaughtered by the millions, organizations like the Bund instead blame Jews for the ills of world society and suggest they be left to fend for themselves. This reality highlights the truth that Philip, his family, and countless families like them have long known: that when the chips are down, Gentile Americans will not support or stand in solidarity beside their Jewish neighbors—instead, Jewish Americans will be left to pick up the pieces themselves.

❝ My brother had discovered in himself the uncommon gift to be somebody, and so while making speeches praising President Lindbergh and while exhibiting his drawings of him and while publicly extolling (in words written by Aunt Evelyn) the enriching benefits of his eight weeks as a Jewish farm hand in the Gentile heartland—while doing, if the truth be known, what I wouldn't have minded doing myself, by doing what was normal and patriotic all over America and aberrant and freakish only in his home—Sandy was having the time of his life.

Related Characters: Philip Roth (speaker), Charles Lindbergh, Aunt Evelyn, Sanford "Sandy" Roth

Related Themes:

Page Number: 184

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Philip's brother Sandy—fresh from the OAA's Just Folks program, a program which sends young Jewish teens to live with Gentile families across America for summers and other school breaks—goes around with Aunt Evelyn "publicly extolling" the values of the American heartland. Philip is stunned by the deeply ironic fact that what is "normal and patriotic" by the majority of Americans' standards is "aberrant and freakish" within the Roth household—in other words, Sandy's obsession with Lindbergh and his love for heartland values and Gentile ways of life makes him a stranger in his own home.

In such a frightening time for Jewish Americans, it should be more important than ever for Sandy to stand in solidarity with his family, proud of his heritage and devoted to protecting it—instead, Sandy wants to literally run away from all things Jewish and proclaim his fealty to the Lindbergh administration, their social programs, and the Gentiles who would, unbeknownst to Sandy, likely turn on him in a heartbeat. This passage is significant because it speaks to Sandy's desire to assimilate into American culture—a desire that runs counter to his parents' desire to raise their children in a Jewish neighborhood with Jewish traditions. Sandy is at "war" with his family—a war he himself has made, and one that will have lasting reverberations, given what it reveals about him and his allegiances.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ "And who will I talk to?" she asked. "Who will I have there like the friends I've had my whole life?"

"There are women there, too."

"Gentile women," she said. [...] "Good Christian women," she said," who will fall all over themselves to make me feel at home. They have no right to do this!" she proclaimed. [...] "this is *illegal*. You cannot just take Jews because they're Jews and force them to live where you want them to."

Related Characters: Herman Roth, Bess Roth (speaker), Sanford "Sandy" Roth, Philip Roth

Related Themes:

Page Number: 208

Explanation and Analysis

When the Roth family receives their summons from the OAA under Homestead 42—a government program aimed at relocating Jewish families westward by providing them with land to settle in the American heartland—Philip's calm, quiet, kind mother Bess is consumed by fear, panic, anger, and vitriol. In this passage, as Bess criticizes the "good Christian women" whom she knows will be her new neighbors—women who will "fall all over themselves" to welcome her but who won't provide any meaningful companionship, solidarity, or community—and who will try to erase or ignore Beth and her family's Jewishness.

Bess is angry and frightened by the U.S. government's illegal activities—she does not want to be forced to move from the only neighborhood that has ever felt like home. For Bess, who grew up in the New Jersey town of Elizabeth, a place in which her family was the only Jewish household for miles, the idea of being cut off from a Jewish community once again is downright petrifying. Being relocated against her will represents the culmination of every dark truth Bess has ever allowed herself to suspect about America: that Jews are citizens only conditionally, that their otherness is just

barely tolerated, and that the government can do with its Jewish citizens precisely what it wants to at any time, in any place.

"I am not running away!" he shouted, startling everyone. "This is our country!" "No, my mother said sadly, "not anymore. It's Lindbergh's. It's the goyim's. It's their country," she said, and her breaking voice and the shocking words and the nightmare immediacy of what was mercilessly real forced my father [...] to see himself with mortifying clarity: a devoted father of titanic energy no more capable of protecting his family from harm than was Mr. Wishnow hanging dead in the closet.

Related Characters: Bess Roth, Herman Roth (speaker), Charles Lindbergh, Mr. Wishnow, Philip Roth

Related Themes:

Page Number: 226

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Bess and Herman continue an ongoing and miserable argument about what to do in the face of Homestead 42's edict. Bess believes their family should flee to Canada, but Herman is repulsed by the idea of running away from his country. Bess points out that America was never really "their" country—it is the country of the *goyim*, or the Gentiles (non-Jews), and it always has been. To think that America has ever truly been welcoming of its Jewish citizens, Bess posits, is blind and foolish. As Bess drags her husband—and indeed her sons—into the knowledge of the "mercilessly real," Philip watches his father break down.

This passage is significant because it speaks to several of the novel's major themes: the "wars" that erupt within families, the constant pressure Jewish families face to assimilate into American culture, and, most importantly, the hidden emotional truths of Jewish life in America. While Herman has convinced himself that America is, in many ways, a homeland to Jews, Bess, who grew up in a predominantly-Gentile neighborhood, has always known the "mortifying" truth: that Jews are only conditionally welcome in America, and that anti-Semitism and white supremacy is now being allowed to flourish in the open under Lindbergh's administration.

"I lived in Kentucky! Kentucky is one of the forty-eight states! Human beings live there like they do everywhere else! It is not a concentration camp! This guy makes millions selling his shitty hand lotion—and *you* people believe him!"

"I already told you about the dirty words, and now I'm telling you about this 'you people' business. 'You people' one more time, son, and I am going to ask you to leave the house."

Related Characters: Herman Roth, Sanford "Sandy" Roth (speaker), Bess Roth, Philip Roth, Walter Winchell

Related Themes:

Page Number: 230

Explanation and Analysis

As Philip and Sandy's parents, Bess and Herman, argue about what to do in the face of Homestead 42—whether they should comply or resist, flee to Canada or stay at home—Sandy, who rejects his own Jewishness, lambasts his parents for overreacting to the news of the OAA's edict. Herman and Bess worry that if the American government can relocate Jews at will, then they can also place them in concentration camps like the one in Europe. Sandy reacts to this genuine concern by flying off the handle, chastising his parents for listening to the Jewish radio host Walter Winchell and calling them "you people."

Sandy wants to mark his otherness from his family—he has had a taste of "normal," white, Christian America, and he longs for more. Sandy is actually excited by the idea of returning to Kentucky, assimilating, and blending in—but his parents, Herman especially, are furious with him for attempting to separate himself from the rest of his family and attempt to erase his own culture, heritage, and religion. This passage speaks to the ongoing "war" between Sandy and his family as Sandy fights to separate himself from his Jewishness. His parents, by contrast, are more terrified than ever as they confront the realities of what it means to be Jewish under a white supremacist political administration whose primary goal is to strip them of their community, their traditions, and indeed their solidarity with one another.

"But who could have taken them? Where could they be? They're mine! We've got to find them! They're my stamps!

I was inconsolable. I envisioned a horde of orphans spotting the album in the woods and tearing it apart with their filthy hands. I saw them pulling out the stamps and eating them and stomping on them and flushing them by the handful down the toilet in their terrible bathroom. They hated the album because it wasn't theirs—they hated the album because nothing was theirs.

Related Characters: Philip Roth (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 236

Explanation and Analysis

Philip attempts to run away from home in the middle of the night, only to receive a concussion after being kicked by a horse while taking a shortcut through a field owned by a local Catholic orphanage. He's then brought to the hospital and separated from his beloved stamp collection (which he brought with him in his suitcase), and he's "inconsolable" at the thought of having lost the stamps forever. In this passage, as Philip imagines a "horde of orphans," angry because "nothing [is] theirs," tearing his stamps apart, Roth examines Philip' complicated psychological reaction to the loss of the stamps.

Throughout the novel, stamps have symbolized Philip's belief in the promises of America, and now they're seemingly gone forever—and so too is Philip's faith in America. As Philip imagines orphans seizing upon his stamp collection, his vision of what he is not is tinged by the recognition of what he is. The orphans who hate the stamp album—and the picture-perfect version of America it represents—have "nothing." Philip is now being forced to realize that he and his family, too, have been in a sense "orphaned" and left in the cold by the very place that promised them prosperity and acceptance. The orphans in Philip's vision are manifestations of his own dissatisfaction with and anger toward an America that doesn't exist—or, if it does exist, is part of a reality he'll never be able to possess.

Chapter 7 Quotes

Of course, that no Jew could ever be elected to the presidency—least of all a Jew with a mouth as unstoppable as Winchell's—even a kid as young as I was already accepted, as if the proscription were laid out in so many words in the U.S. Constitution. Yet not even that ironclad certainty could stop the adults from abandoning common sense and, for a night or two, imagining themselves and their children as native-born citizens of Paradise.

Related Characters: Philip Roth (speaker), Charles Lindbergh, Walter Winchell

Related Themes:

Page Number: 244-245

Explanation and Analysis

When radio host and gossip columnist Walter Winchell announces that he will be running against Lindbergh in the presidential election that is to take place in two years' time, his declaration is more of a bid to gauge opposition to the Lindbergh administration—and a show of faith in Jewish resistance. When the Roths and their neighbors hear the news, they know all of this—and they're aware, as even young Philip is, that in America, it seems impossible that a Jew could ever be president. Still, in the face of all of this uncomfortable and unhappy truth, the Roths and their friends and neighbors allow themselves, "for a night or two," to imagine that they and their children are "citizens of Paradise." In other words, they put aside their stoic realism and imagine that Jews are truly accepted in America, that Jewish children will have the same opportunities as Gentile ones, and that America is indeed the Paradise their ancestors believed it to be.

This passage is significant because it highlights the desire for acceptance that Jewish families in America have—a desire which, for some families and individuals, pushes them toward assimilation and abandonment of their Jewish identity in order to be considered a "citizen of Paradise." Through this quotation, Roth alleges that Jewish life in America is always burdened by harsh realities of ostracism and suspicion—and that in spite of that, some Jewish Americans still begrudgingly dream of the acceptance.

"Well, like it or not, Lindbergh is teaching us what it is to be Jews." Then she added, "We only think we're Americans." "Nonsense. No!" my father replied. "*They* think we only think we're Americans. It is not up for discussion, Bess. It is not up for negotiation. These people are not understanding that I take this for *granted*, goddamnit! Others? He dares to call us *others*? *He's* the other. The one who looks most American—and he's the one who is least American!"

Related Characters: Herman Roth, Bess Roth (speaker), Philip Roth, Alvin Roth, Charles Lindbergh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 255-256

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Philip's parents, Bess and Herman Roth, have a discussion about what it is to be American—and what it is to be told one is not American enough or only conditionally American. Bess is shattered by recent developments: Alvin's flight to Europe, OAA programs meant to assimilate Jewish families and break up Jewish communities, and her own son Sandy's rejection of his Jewishness. As such, she's come to believe that she and her fellow American Jews have been conned into thinking they are Americans, when really, they have never been accepted as such.

However, Bess's husband, Herman, is indignant—he believes it is not Jews who are other in America, but those who "look" American and use their social currency as white Gentiles and members of the status quo to commit un-American acts, say un-American things, and treat others in un-American ways. Herman still has faith in America and in the promises of American citizenship—Bess, however, feels that her whole life has been a lie. Herman and Bess's emotional argument in this passage gets at the heart of the lived emotional truths of American Jews, and how Jewish Americans are constantly made to feel unsteady and unwanted in their own country.

A previously unpublicized section of the homesteading plan called the Good Neighbor Project [was] designed to introduce a steadily increasing number of non-Jewish residents into predominantly Jewish neighborhoods and in this way "enrich" the "Americanness" of everyone involved. [...] The underlying goal of the Good Neighbor Project like that of Just Folks, was to weaken the solidarity of the Jewish social structure as well as to diminish whatever electoral strength a Jewish community might have in local and congressional elections.

Related Characters: Philip Roth (speaker), Charles Lindbergh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 280-281

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Philip describes the Good Neighbor Project—yet another OAA program aimed at destabilizing Jewish communities and weakening Jewish constituencies throughout America. As the Lindbergh administration continues to hold power over America, its nefarious offers introduce more and more programs and pieces of legislation aimed at weakening Jewish solidarity and assimilating Jewish families. At this point, the cheery nature of these programs' names stands in undeniably stark contrast to their true aims, which are no longer even thinly-veiled from the very people they attack.

Philip and his family know what programs like the Good Neighbors Project are supposed to do—and what the language used to describe their aims is meant to highlight about Jewish communities. The Just Folks program suggests that Jews can never be "just folks"—they must learn about American ways of life from "real" Americans. The Good Neighbor Project suggests that Jews are not good-enough neighbors, and that other groups of ethnic and religious minorities or non-Jewish families must instruct Jews as to how to be "good neighbors" in their own communities. The very title of the Office of American Absorption speaks to the Lindbergh administration's goal of assimilating Jews into America—Jews, its title suggests, are not yet a part of America, but are other, suspect, and apart. This passage represents the exhaustion, anger, and indeed the fear which Philip and his family have come to feel as the OAA and the Lindbergh administration have tightened their grips on America's Jewish families, sending individual family units into wars with one another and making Jewish neighborhoods into places that are barely recognizable.

Chapter 8 Quotes

A family, my father liked to say, is both peace and war, but this was family war as I could never have imagined it. Spitting into my father's face the way he'd spit into the face of that dead German soldier!

Related Characters: Philip Roth (speaker), Alvin Roth, Herman Roth

Related Themes:

Page Number: 297

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, as Philip watches a horrible physical fight erupt between his father, Herman, and his cousin Alvin, he is struck once again by his father's earlier proclamation that a family is both "peace and war." Herman once offered up that phrase as a calming balm against the small squabbles of life under increased fear and pressure, soothing his family by acknowledging the struggles of keeping the peace all the time in the midst of such frightening times. Now, though, the phrase comes back to haunt Philip as he reconsiders the statement in the context of Alvin's participation—and loss of limb and nearly life—in the actual war. "Family war," Philip now realizes, is not just the small squabbles that make life uncomfortable, but the huge, uncrossable barriers that uncontrollable and negative outside influences create. As Philip watches Alvin spit in his father's face—just as Alvin spat in the face of a dead German soldier, according to a story he told upon his return from war—Philip sees how deeply hatred and cruelty can affect a family.

I wept all the way to school. Our incomparable American childhood was ended. Soon my homeland would be nothing more than my birthplace.

Related Characters: Philip Roth (speaker), Rabbi Lionel Bengelsdorf, Herman Roth

Related Themes:

Page Number: 301

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Philip has just overheard a phone conversation between his father, Herman, and a family friend—a conversation in which the two men began plotting the steps needed in order to flee an increasingly violent and anti-Semitic America for Canada. Philip weeps at the idea of leaving America—and his "incomparable American childhood," a fantasy which was only ever half-realized—behind. Philip laments the idea that the place he has been taught to conceive of as his homeland will soon no longer be, and in light of what he's learned about the world around him, never truly was the place he thought it to be.

This passage is significant because it invokes the idea so obsequiously touted by Rabbi Lionel Bengelsdorf earlier in the novel of America as the true Jewish homeland—the only country Jews have lived in from which they have not been ousted—and it exposes how false that idea is. Philip is learning that America is not, and never truly was, the homeland of his family or of his people—it is just the place he was born. This new truth, emergent within the fictional timeline Philip Roth creates throughout *The Plot Against America*, is unfortunately a profound emotional truth for many Jewish Americans living in the "real" America: a country that can be hostile to difference and willfully ignorant of the struggles of religious and ethnic minorities.

Chapter 9 Quotes

My father was a rescuer and orphans were his specialty. A displacement even greater than having to move to Union or to leave for Kentucky was to lose one's parents and be orphaned. Witness, he would tell you, what had happened to Alvin. Witness what had happened to his sister-in-law after Grandma had died. No one should be motherless and fatherless. Motherless and fatherless you are vulnerable to manipulation, to influences—you are rootless and you are vulnerable to everything.

Related Characters: Philip Roth (speaker), Mrs. Wishnow, Seldon Wishnow, Alvin Roth, Herman Roth

Related Themes:

Page Number: 358

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, as Philip recounts his father's journey west to rescue Seldon Wishnow from Kentucky after Seldon's mother is murdered in anti-Semitic riots, he zeroes in on his father's desire to protect orphans—those who are "rootless and vulnerable to anything." This passage is significant because it illustrates the importance of family, born or made, in providing a safe haven in times of war and peace alike. As Roth delves into his father's psyche, there is also an unspoken facet of Herman's desire to protect the orphans in his orbit which Roth tacitly implies: that Jewish orphans especially are more "vulnerable to manipulation," more "rootless," and more unlikely to find willing protectors. Especially in a time in which Jewish communities are under attack, Herman Roth knows that getting Seldon out of Kentucky and back to Newark is literally a matter of life and death—and as Philip looks on and admires his father's heroism, he sees clearly just how essential Jewish identity and Jewish community truly are.

> This was how Seldon came to live with us. After their safe return to Newark from Kentucky, Sandy moved into the sun parlor and Seldon took over where Alvin and Aunt Evelyn had left off—as the person in the twin bed next to mine shattered by the malicious indignities of Lindbergh's America. There was no stump for me to care for this time. The boy himself was the stump, and until he was taken to live with his mother's married sister in Brooklyn ten months later, I was the prosthesis.

Related Characters: Philip Roth (speaker), Mrs. Wishnow, Charles Lindbergh, Aunt Evelyn, Alvin Roth, Sanford "Sandy" Roth, Seldon Wishnow

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 361-362

Explanation and Analysis

In the final lines of the novel, Philip describes his family's decision to shelter Seldon Wishnow for several months after rescuing him from Kentucky, the place where he was orphaned after his mother was killed in the midst of anti-Semitic riots in Louisville. In this stark and defeated passage, Philip describes caring for a boy who had become a "stump"—vulnerable, wounded, and subject to recurrent damage. Philip calls himself a "prosthesis" for Seldon, evoking the image of Philip's cousin Alvin's ill-fitting prosthetic leg and insinuating that while he tried his best to support Seldon through a difficult time, he was ultimately (as many prostheses are) an imperfect fit for Seldon's needs.

This passage encapsulates the state of American society generally and Jewish communities more specifically in the wake of Lindbergh's presidency: stunned, hobbled, and unsure of what steps must be taken (or even *can* be taken) to repair what has been lost and tend to what has been damaged. Now that American Jews have witnessed the depths of their own countrymen's capacity for cruelty, violence, and betrayal, they can lean on only one another for care, help, and solidarity—and yet whatever the members of America's Jewish communities can give to one another is small and insufficient in the wake of all they've learned.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1: VOTE FOR LINDBERGH OR VOTE FOR WAR

As an older Philip Roth looks back on his childhood, he finds that every memory from his youth is tinged with "perpetual fear." He wonders if his memories would be less frightening if Lindbergh hadn't been elected president—or if he himself hadn't been Jewish. In June of 1940, Charles Lindbergh, America's "aviation hero," secures the Republican nomination for the presidency. Philip's father, Herman, is an insurance salesman, and his mother, Bess, is a homemaker. His older brother, Sandy, is a 12-year-old with a talent for drawing. Philip himself, meanwhile, is a boy of just seven with a **stamp**-collecting obsession fueled by President Roosevelt's own love of the hobby.

The opening lines of the novel situate the reader in a fictionalized—but emotionally authentic—version of the writer Philip Roth's childhood in New Jersey. Philip ties the fear he experienced as a child to the fact that his and his family's Jewish identities came under attack when he was young, their idyllic American lives interrupted by the looming threat of anti-Semitism.

The Roths live in a two-family home on a tree-lined street in the Weequahic neighborhood of Newark. Though the Roth's bustling, firmly middle-class neighborhood is predominantly Jewish, the surrounding neighborhoods are predominantly Gentile, or non-Jewish. Though all of Philip's schoolmates and neighbors are Jewish, he feels that work unites the neighborhood more than religion does. While Jewish doctors, lawyers, and successful merchants live in other, nicer neighborhoods, the Roths' neighborhood is defined by hardworking people and small family-owned businesses.

For Philip, his family, and their neighbors, Judaism is part of the fabric of their community. Philip and his family and many of their friends are largely secular Jews, united not so much by tradition or faith as they are by culture, proximity, and shared secular values. This passage shows how even Jews who have largely assimilated into American life already are still seen by Gentiles as other—and they're ostracized unfairly for their perceived difference.

The adult Jews in the Roths' neighborhood are not observant in "outward, recognizable ways"—no one speaks with an Old World accent or wears a long beard, and there is hardly any Hebrew lettering stenciled anywhere beyond the butcher shop, the synagogue, and the cemetery. In 1940, Israel does not exist, and six million Jews have not yet been murdered in the Holocaust. The idea of a Jewish national homeland is a distant one to Philip, who says the pledge of allegiance to the only homeland he has ever known in class every morning. Everything changes, though, when Lindbergh is nominated by the Republicans.

Philip and his family believe in America as their homeland, and while religion is part of their lives, they are insulated from many of the very real threats and violence that Jews living abroad face every day. Roth hints at the false sense of security this way of life has given the Roths and their neighbors, foreshadowing the fact that this peacetime could be disrupted if Lindbergh is elected president.

Lindbergh is—and has been for over a decade—a hero in Philip's neighborhood, just as he is everywhere else in the nation. Flying nonstop from Long Island to Paris in his monoplane the *Spirit of St. Louis* in 1927 catapulted the man to fame. He completed the trip on the same day Bess discovered she was pregnant with Sandy, giving the trip a personal place in the Roth family lore. Sandy was only four in March of 1932 when Lindbergh and his wife, Anne's, first child was kidnapped and, weeks later, discovered dead in the woods miles from their home. The Lindberghs moved to England in the wake of the tragedy, and Lindbergh began taking trips to Nazi Germany. Lindbergh's public expressions of admiration for Adolf Hitler turned him into a figure who, by the time Philip began school in 1938, provoked anger in the Roth household.

This passage provides some historical context about Lindbergh's place in the American cultural imagination circa 1940. Having long been an American aviation hero, Lindbergh's anti-Semitic tendencies and hobnobbing with Nazis in recent years has transformed him from an figurehead of American industry and intrepidness into a reviled and traitorous puppet figure—at least for Philip and for many Jews across America.

1938 was the most terrible year for European Jews in nearly 2 millennia—it was the year of Kristallnacht, the most terrible pogrom (organized massacre) in modern history. 1938 was also the year when Lindbergh refused to return the medal bestowed on him by Air Marshal Göring on behalf of Hitler himself, unwilling to perpetrate an "unnecessary insult" against the Nazis. In 1938, Lindbergh was the first famous American whom Philip learned to hate. Lindbergh's nomination in 1940 represents one of the only "threats" to Philip's security as an American he has yet experienced.

The idea that Lindbergh, a Nazi sympathizer who either ignores or endorses the violence perpetrated against the European Jews, could have once been a figure so important and so inspirational to so many Americans demonstrates the profound divide between Gentile consciousness and Jewish consciousness. Jews must often face the destruction of their heroes, who often serve as stark reminders of the ways in which Jews are discounted or actively discriminated against.

The only other "threat" Philip can recall took place about a year earlier, in 1939, when his father was offered a promotion—and a transfer to an office six miles away in a Gentile neighborhood. Philip's mother Bess, who grew up in Elizabeth as part of one of the only Jewish families in town, harbored reservations about the move. When Herman took the family on a drive through the neighborhood in an attempt to reassure Bess of its safety, the Roths spotted an outdoor party full of people dressed in lederhosen—Herman declared the party a "fascist" meeting of the German American Bund. The next day, Herman declined the promotion.

This passage provides further context for the persistent difficulties of Jewish life in the early 1940s. A man like Herman, who has never known anything but America, must still contend with the idea that he and his family are ostracized and even hated by large chunks of the population. This consciousness seeps into Herman's professional life as well, barring him from certain opportunities and dictating the way he lives his life and raises his family.

In 1939, the Lindberghs moved home to America from Europe and resume life in the public eye. As Hitler's armies invaded and occupied country after country, Lindbergh, on a public speaking tour, began insisting that America stay out of the war and refuse aid to Britain and France, who had declared war on Germany. As Roosevelt urged Congress to loosen restrictions mandating American neutrality, Lindbergh's isolationist rhetoric deepened. At a rally in Des Moines, Lindbergh gave a speech declaring that "the Jewish race" was responsible for pushing the country toward war. The next day, the media and the Democratic machine responded with outrage to Lindbergh's speech, but the America First Committee seized upon Lindbergh as a figurehead of their flourishing movement.

This passage provides authentic, historically-accurate context for Lindbergh's ascent to power. The things Roth reports Lindbergh having said in this passage are all true, and they provide a worrisome sense of foreshadowing concerning anti-Semitism's popularity in America in spite of purported American values of equality, tolerance, and acceptance.

Philip looks back to the night of June 27th, 1940—the night of the Republican Convention. After hours of listening to a deadlocked convention on the radio, Sandy and Philip go to bed. At 3:18 a.m., Lindbergh walks onto the floor of the convention, where he is applauded for 30 minutes and placed in nomination. Early in the morning, before sunrise, the boys are awakened by their neighbors' chagrined shouts—an isolationist anti-Semite is running for president of the United States. As neighbors mill about in the streets in their pajamas and slippers, Philip and Sandy are shocked by the anger, confusion, and outrage that has swiftly overtaken their neighborhood.

This passage represents the first major break with the historical record in the novel. Lindbergh did not actually secure the Republican nomination in 1940—but as Roth imagines what would have erupted in his childhood hometown if he did, it becomes clear that American Jews at this time are positively stunned by the ability of anti-Semitism and isolationism to prevail over the American values on which they've been raised.

The next day, Philip's family and neighbors are comforted by Roosevelt's "robust response" to Lindbergh's nomination. Roosevelt, who has appointed several Jews to his cabinet and Supreme Court, is a "friend" to the Jews of America. In the days that follow, newspaper headlines are plastered with images of Lindbergh accepting his medal from the Nazis and shaking hands with Hermann Göring.

It's clear that many Americans still oppose Lindbergh and find his support of the Nazi regime mortifying and unacceptable—yet this passage also foreshadows that an anti-Semitic American hero is still, to many people, an American hero first. This demonstrates one example of how Jewish needs and perspectives have been sidelined throughout American history.

On Sunday night, the Roths and their neighbors wait and listen excitedly by their radios for Walter Winchell's nine p.m. broadcast. Bolstered by Winchell's short but boisterous, fearless broadcast—which calls Lindbergh's candidacy "the greatest threat ever to American democracy"—the Roths and their neighbors pour out into the streets for an impromptu block party. Winchell, a Jewish radio host, is a notorious gossip personality, but his devotion to the truth makes him a figure that the Roths and their neighbors admire. During the party, Philip feels that he and his family are once again Americans simply out for a night of enjoying freedom in the open air.

This passage shows how important Walter Winchell—and, by proxy, Jewish perspective, validation, and solidarity—truly is to Philip's family and neighbors. As Lindbergh's campaign threatens to redefine "Americanness," Americans like Winchell with no patience for anti-Semitism or "America First" rhetoric make Philip's community feel less afraid.

Philip's brother Sandy is a talented young artist known throughout the neighborhood for his ability to draw anyone and anything—he has even won awards in school and from the city for his entries into local art contests, such as an illustration for an Arbor Day poster he based off of one of Philip's **stamps** from his stamp collection. Sandy spends all of his allowance money on art supplies which he keeps stored in his and Philip's closet, while his drawings stay beneath the bed in a black portfolio. Philip is in awe of his talented, inventive, and willful older brother.

This passage demonstrates how both Philip and Sandy have a shared reverence for the images and institutions of American life. They both covet these images—while Philip collects them, Sandy replicates them.

One day, home alone with Philip, Sandy opens up his portfolio and spreads out on the dining room table several portraits of Lindbergh. It is clear from the loving way Sandy has rendered Lindbergh that he admires the man greatly. As Sandy and Philip look at the drawings, Sandy declares that Lindbergh is going to win the presidency—and that America is going to "go fascist" according to their cousin Alvin, who wants to join the Canadian Army and fight for the British against Hitler. Sandy urges Philip not to tell anyone about the portraits—he has told their parents he tore the drawings up. Philip agrees to keep Sandy's secret, as he himself is still hanging on to a **stamp** from 1927 commemorating Lindbergh's fateful flight.

Philip and Sandy have both been raised to see Lindbergh as a hero and his aviation antics as emblems of American innovation and boundary-breaking. To have such a widely-adored hero shattered and rendered off-limits is hard for the boys, who clearly both still harbor differing degrees of reverence for Lindbergh and all that his achievements represent. This passage foreshadows the dual consciousness the boys inhabit: they know Lindbergh hates Jewish people, yet they cannot divest themselves from conceiving of him as an American hero.

Philip and his friends have been playing a new game all summer—called "I Declare War," the game consists of the boys bouncing a rubber ball on a chalk circle divided into pie-like segments, each of which represents a different European country. The game, which the boys play continuously in the streets, agitates and worries their mothers—yet the boys can't stop playing, since declaring war is now all they think about.

This passage shows how fears of—and excitements surrounding—war has creeped into every facet of Philip and his friends' lives. As young as they are, they cannot keep fear and anxiety away, so they try to reconfigure those bad feelings into a game that lets them feel in control.

On the Saturday before Labor Day, Lindbergh officially launches his campaign by flying *The Spirit of St. Louis* to Los Angeles, where a gleeful crowd awaits him. He announces that he wants to run for president in order to "preserve American democracy," concluding his speech by stating that Americans have a simple choice to make: a choice between his election and war. Lindbergh embarks on a tour of America in his biplane, spending a day in each of the 48 states over the course of six weeks. At each campaign stop, he repeats his central message: vote for Lindbergh or vote for war.

Lindbergh runs on a purely isolationist platform. While American values are theoretically comprised of solidarity, empathy, and the pursuit of what's right, Lindbergh's America First ideology strikes a chord. Lindbergh's candidacy reveals the self-interested nature of America's underbelly—an underbelly that would rather turn a blind eye to the suffering of European Jews than risk going to war.

In October, Lindbergh flies to Newark, where a local rabbi, Lionel Bengelsdorf, is among the those who welcome him. Bengelsdorf is the prominent leader of a local Conservative congregation and is widely regarded as "the religious leader of New Jersey Jewry." A native of South Carolina whose wife, a wealthy heiress, died in 1936, Bengelsdorf's sermons are broadcast weekly on the radio to a wide audience. In many of these sermons, Bengelsdorf discusses how developing an American value system should be "the first priority" for American Jews. As Bengelsdorf speaks at the airport, he states that he supports Lindbergh not in spite of his own Jewishness, but because he is an "*American* Jew."

This passage introduces Rabbi Lionel Bengelsdorf, one of the novel's most complex, unknowable characters and one of its primary antagonists. Bengelsdorf's insistence on assimilation as a "priority" for Jews makes him hated by many. Members of Philip's family and community see Bengelsdorf's rhetoric as being designed to please the Gentile establishment—not designed to enhance the education, spiritual life, and well-being of his congregation as a rabbi's agenda should be. Bengelsdorf shares Lindbergh's allegiance to America over allegiance to his own people.

Bengelsdorf participates in another Lindbergh rally at Madison Square Garden several days later. As the Roths listen to the broadcast, Alvin states that Lindbergh has "bought" Bengelsdorf. Herman urges Alvin to give Bengelsdorf a chance. Bengelsdorf goes on to claim that Lindbergh's visits to Nazi Germany were actually part of his role as "secret adviser to the U.S. government." Bengelsdorf says that the war in Europe is not America's war—and that while he is saddened to hear of Jews Germany being persecuted, he is an American first, and he doesn't want to see American lives lost in a European conflict.

This passage makes even more transparent just how divisive, and in many ways maddening, Bengelsdorf is to the very people he's supposed to represent. Bengelsdorf's America First beliefs—whether authentic or, as Alvin suggests, simply a show of fealty toward Lindbergh in pursuit of money or power—are painful for many Jews.

Rattled by Bengelsdorf's speech, Bess leaves the room on the verge of tears. Herman begins shouting obscenities about Bengelsdorf and his ridiculous speech. Alvin numbly states that Bengelsdorf is "koshering Lindbergh for the goyim"—in giving Lindbergh a rabbi's stamp of approval, Alvin believes, Bengelsdorf has just guaranteed his win over Roosevelt.

Alvin rightly predicts that Lindbergh is using Bengelsdorf to send a message to Gentile voters that the Jewish community accepts and supports Lindbergh, too. Bengelsdorf's purpose is to assuage whatever guilt Gentiles (or, for that matter, Jews) might feel about electing a man with a track record of making anti-Semitic statements.

That night, Philip wakes up on the floor—he has rolled out of bed for the second time in as many weeks. The first time he rolled out of bed, he couldn't remember what propelled him there—this time, he realizes that he has rolled out to escape a nightmare. In the dream, Philip recalls taking his **stamp album** out to bring it over to the house of his friend Earl Axman, an older fifth-grade boy he sometimes compares collections with—Earl has the best stamp collection in town. In the dream, Philip is walking down the street toward Earl's when he drops his album on the spot where he and his friends often play "I Declare War." As the album flutters open, Philip realizes that all of his stamps bearing Washington's face have been replaced with stamps bearing Hitler's visage—all of his other stamps have been covered in giant swastikas.

Philip's nightmare speaks to the hidden (and even subconscious) ways in which the rise of anti-Semitism in America is seeping into psyche of Jewish families around the country. Philip fears that the Nazis will succeed in taking over everything. His symbolic dream about the corruption of his stamp collection signals his belief that for all his and his family's faith in America, they will not be protected when the chips are down.

CHAPTER 2: LOUDMOUTH JEW

In June of 1941—six months after Lindbergh's inauguration—the Roths drive to Washington, D.C. for a sightseeing vacation. Bess and Herman booked the trip while Roosevelt was still in office. After Lindbergh was elected, the Roths discussed visiting Niagara Falls and Canada instead, in order to check out Ottawa in case moving to Canada became necessary—in February of 1941, Alvin runs away from home to join the Canadian armed forces.

This passage shows just how starkly life has changed for the Roths—and, ostensibly, for countless Jewish families like them—in just a few short months. Their family has been broken up, and the Roths no longer feel entirely safe in America. This positions their trip to Washington as an attempt to stand their ground and declare that they are still invested in their lives as Americans.

Alvin, orphaned at 13, was the Roths' ward for seven years—but after growing frustrated with his job as a driver for the obnoxious millionaire construction mogul Abe Steinheim, whom Herman had hoped would be a positive influence on the rebellious Alvin, Alvin rejected Steinheim's offer to pay for Alvin's college education at Rutgers. Philip recounts the explosive, lengthy, week-long argument Herman and Alvin had when Herman learned that Alvin planned to reject Steinheim's offer—a fight which Herman himself referred to as a "little war" within their family, but which forever changed its fabric when Alvin called Steinheim a "disgrace to the Jews" and fled to Canada.

This passage is important because it introduces the idea of the family and the home as a site of both peace and war—often both at the same time. Herman believes that in spite of the "little war[s]" within their family, the Roths can remain united—Alvin, though, declares by leaving that he feels there is no room for the compromise of one's values, even within the realm of the family home.

Philip looks back even further, to the November 1940 election—which Lindbergh won in a landslide, earning 57 percent of the popular vote and 46 states. Pundits claimed many reasons for Lindbergh's victory, citing Americans' reluctance to elect a president to a third term and Lindbergh's anti-war stance. When Lindbergh, weeks after his inauguration, traveled to Iceland to meet with Hitler and draw up a document known as the "Iceland Understanding," guaranteeing America's isolationist stance—and then flew to Hawaii to sign a similar understanding with two emissaries of Japan's Emperor Hirohito—the U.S. became an unofficial member of the Axis Powers. In the aftermath of these meetings, American Jews became more worried than ever.

In this passage, Philip illustrates how the Lindbergh administration has swiftly capitulated to the Axis Powers, legitimizing the fascist regimes of both Nazi Germany and Japan. This is, of course, horrible news for American Jews, as Hitler's entire Third Reich is predicated upon the creation of a white ethnostate free of any Jewish people. The "understandings" Lindbergh reaches with both Germany and Japan demonstrate something which Philip feels is unprecedented in American history.

Philip is frightened by his parents' increasing agitation as well as Walter Winchell's frequent broadcasts about potential locations in which the Lindbergh administration could, if it wanted to, construct concentration camps for American Jews. In response, Philip becomes increasingly invested in his **stamp**-collecting hobby. Philip even asks to take his collection on the upcoming trip to Washington, determined not to let the album out of his sight for fear of the "transformation" he saw in his terrible nightmare.

As Philip's life changes all around him, it stands to reason that he comes to believe the "transformation" he envisioned in his nightmare could very well come true. Jewish life in America is being threatened—and Philip, young as he is, is sensitive to what that means for his and his family's daily lives.

The Roths arrive in Washington. Almost immediately, they find themselves lost, surrounded by the very edifices of American history which they subconsciously hope will protect them from Lindbergh. A motorcycle police officer, seeing their out-of-state plates, offers to help get them to their destination. Herman happily offers the officer their hotel's address, but Bess is nervous that the cop is leading them somewhere else and begins to cry. As they arrive at their destination safely, Bess apologizes to Sandy and Philip, claiming that she doesn't feel she lives in a "normal country" anymore.

This passage shows how seriously threatened Bess feels as she undertakes even normal, everyday tasks and parts of life. Bess doesn't trust any of the institutions that are there to protect her any longer—she is constantly waiting for the worst. Her feelings are a direct result of Lindbergh's anti-Semitic, America First administration.

After setting their bags down, the Roths head back down to their car. Outside the hotel, a man who introduces himself as Mr. Taylor is waiting near their vehicle. He explains that he is a professional tour guide for hire and offers to drive them around the city, help them find places to eat, and offer detailed information about all the major monuments. In spite of Herman's reservations about the cost of the daily tours (and Bess's suspicions about the man's motivations), the Roths agree to hire Mr. Taylor. Together, they all set off for lunch and the Washington monument. When Mr. Taylor declares that Washington is regarded by many as the greatest president alongside Lincoln, Herman adds that FDR should be included as one of the greats—and that it's a shame he was "turned [...] out of office" by Lindbergh. Mr. Taylor does not respond.

As the Roths set out into Washington, Bess's fear and distrust continues to inform their family's experience of the city just as much as Herman's bullheaded insistence upon enjoying the trip as if nothing is wrong. Herman is not afraid to state his opinions and be who he is, no matter their company—Bess, however, fears that being too loud, too opinionated, or too outwardly Jewish could land them all in hot water. In Bess's mind, their seemingly apolitical tour guide, Mr. Taylor, is a ticking time bomb who represents the unknowability of what's going on in the mind of the average Gentile these days.

As the Roths continue their tour of the Washington Monument, Herman continues extolling FDR and denigrating Lindbergh. Bess warns him to keep his voice down—and not to express such strong opinions to Mr. Taylor, who is essentially a stranger—but Herman insists that he won't be silenced. As the group moves on across the National Mall to the Lincoln Memorial, Herman continues lamenting how the U.S. treats its greatest leaders. As they approach the monument, an elderly woman who overhears Herman's remarks loudly states that she is grateful for President Lindbergh. When Herman expresses anger at the woman comparing Lindbergh to Lincoln, a man from the woman's tour group calls Herman a "loudmouth Jew."

In this passage, Herman's belief that he is safe and protected under the American edicts of free speech and the right to liberty are placed under attack for the first time. Herman is verbally assaulted on the basis of his being a Jew—and as Philip witnesses the anti-Semitic cruelty lobbed at his father, he is forced to consider, for perhaps the first times in his life, his and his family's own otherness in the eyes of Gentiles.

Mr. Taylor quickly leads the Roths away from the other tour group into a small hall off the main chamber, where the Gettysburg Address is inscribed upon the wall. Herman laments hearing such words "in a shrine to a man like [Lincoln.]" Mr. Taylor starts trying to tell the Roths some facts about the monument, but Herman is depressed and irate. Herman suggests they return to the hotel for a nap before taking a nighttime drive to see the city all lit up at night. He assures Bess that they'll all feel better after a rest. Before leaving the memorial, Herman urges Philip and Sandy to take a long look at the huge statue of Lincoln and enjoy the sight "every American should see"—but the boys cannot feel "the raptures of patriotism."

In this passage, as the Roths must contend publicly with the trauma, pain, and embarrassment the elderly lady's words have caused them all, they find themselves divided. Herman still believes in the promises of America, suggesting that the treatment he's just received is uncharacteristic of the norm—but Bess, Philip, and Sandy all feel profoundly let down by America. For the three of them, a curtain has been peeled back, and the truth of America has been revealed.

Back at the hotel, the Roths enter the lobby to find their suitcases at the front desk. A manager informs them that he has packed their room up for them—the man who checked them in made a mistake. The room, he says, was being held for another family. He returns the Roths' deposit and tells them there are no vacancies—they won't be charged for the room or the bar of soap "missing" from their room. Herman is irate and demands to know what's happening. The manager calls the police as Herman rails against the "fascists" who run America now. Mr. Taylor urges Herman to leave before the police come, but Herman insists on staying to tell the police what has happened—he wants them to remind the manager behind the desk of the words in the Gettysburg Address.

This passage represents yet another painful incident of anti-Semitism the Roths face during their rapidly-deteriorating trip to Washington. The Roths hoped that in venturing to their nation's capital in spite of all the unrest in America, they'd be comforted by its monuments and rich history—instead, the Roths are realizing just how quickly and rampantly anti-Semitism has increased across the country. Herman still believes there is relief and guidance to be found in American history—but for the rest of the family, their faith in America is collapsing.

The police arrive and hear both sides of the story—but ultimately side with the hotel manager and urge Herman to take his family and leave. Defeated, Herman joins the rest of his family and Mr. Taylor outside. Mr. Taylor assures Herman that he'll get them a room at a nearby hotel that's just as nice. Just at that moment, Sandy points up at the sky: a low-flying plane is roaring over Washington. Mr. Taylor explains that President Lindbergh himself flies along the Potomac River every afternoon.

As Lindbergh's plane flies overhead, it serves as an overtly symbolic reminder of the omnipresent, crushing, looming forces of anti-Semitism, and how they now drone endlessly over the Roths' everyday lives.

The Roths receive a warm welcome at the shabby new hotel where Mr. Taylor has arranged a room for them. Though their room resembles a tomb, and though the family must double up in twin beds, they all get a much-needed night's sleep. In the morning, Mr. Taylor shows the Roths around the Capitol and Congress as well as the Supreme Court and the Library of Congress—he knows every detail about every place, and Herman admires the man's smarts. Philip takes his **stamp collection** with him to each stop. After lunch, Mr. Taylor takes the Roths to Virginia to tour Mount Vernon. As Mr. Taylor talks about George and Martha Washington, Philip shows him a stamp he has of Martha—he is so proud of Mr. Taylor's excited reaction that all his negative feelings about being Jewish in "Lindbergh's Washington" vanish for the moment.

The following day, the Roths—Philip included—find themselves bolstered once again by their nation's monuments and great history. For just a moment, the terrors of the previous day are forgotten, and Philip especially once again feels connected to his reverence for Americana.

After a happy and restful day at Mount Vernon, the Roths head to a nearby cafeteria for a snack when another low-flying plane roars overhead. As men, women, and children stream into the streets, gossip spreads that it is not Lindbergh flying today, but instead his wife, Anne Morrow Lindbergh. The event, Philip feels, ruins their good time at Mount Vernon, because of the excitement it inspires in everyone but the Roths themselves.

The Roths' second encounter in as many days with a Lindbergh flying overhead serves as yet another symbolic reminder that even in moments in which they feel accepted and supported, the Roths must not allow themselves to drop their guards.

That night, Herman invites Mr. Taylor to join their family for dinner at a nearby cafeteria. Over the meal, Herman talks to Mr. Taylor unreservedly about their family's Jewishness and resultant dislike of Lindbergh, who is a "friend" of Hitler. Bess urges Herman, as she has been doing the entire vacation, to keep his voice down, especially when Herman begins extolling the things Walter Winchell says about Lindbergh's nefarious plans for America's Jewish population. Herman does not listen to Bees—and soon, a large, heavyset man approaches their table and announces that Winchell is a "loudmouth Jew" who is beholden to the British government.

As another random stranger refers to a "loudmouth Jew," it becomes clear that there is a standardized language and conception of Jewish people among anti-Semites—a stereotype of a loud, unrepentant, irksome Jew who needs to be put in his place. At this point, the Roths are too exhausted to be terrified. This instance doesn't hit them as acutely as the first two—it simply reinforces what their new normal is.

Herman stands up to fight with the cruel stranger, but Mr. Taylor intervenes. The owner of the diner also comes over to urge the heavy man to leave the Roths alone. The owner tells the Roths to eat and drink as much as coffee and dessert as they like on the house. Bess begs Herman to pay the bill so they can leave, but Herman insists on finishing their meal. Herman continues making small talk with Mr. Taylor, ignoring the provocations of the heavyset man who returns to his seat and continues saying cruel things about Jews. When Mr. Taylor tells Herman about working at Wabash College in Indiana, Herman sings a rousing song, "On the Banks of the Wabash, Far Away," loudly enough for everyone in the diner to hear. Mr. Taylor applauds Herman. Bess, crying, tells Herman what a lovely singing voice he has.

In this passage, the Roths, having been thoroughly and relentlessly confronted by anti-Semitism at every stop on their trip, make a symbolic commitment to standing their ground as Americans. Herman's rousing song suggests that he is leaning into being a "loudmouth Jew" and choosing to wear the term as a badge of honor rather than accepting it as a tool of ostracism. Herman is loud—but he's loud about what matters. Bess, too, at last accepts that while life may not be easy for a while, she and Herman must remain true to who they are and who they have always been, and stand in solidarity with one another through what's to come.

CHAPTER 3: FOLLOWING CHRISTIANS

On June 22nd, 1941, as Hitler's armies march east toward Russia and break the Hitler-Stalin Non-Aggression Pact, Lindbergh delivers a State of the Union address in which he calls Hitler "the world's greatest safeguard against the spread of Communism and its evils" and declares that he is invested in "an independent destiny for America." As Philip listens to the address with his father, Herman laments that Lindbergh's "independent destiny" means destroying American values. America, he says, is abandoning its friends.

Here, Lindbergh's simpering endorsement of Hitler's stance against "Communism and its evils" incenses Herman. Herman is seemingly more invested in what is good and what is right than anyone else around him—and he knows that Lindbergh has sacrificed America's values, turning the country into an unrecognizable place.

On the last day of June 1941, Sandy leaves for Kentucky. As part of a program created by Lindbergh's Office of American Absorption called Just Folks, Sandy will be spending the next several weeks working on a tobacco farm in the American heartland, much to his parents' chagrin. Bess's younger sister, the boys' aunt Evelyn, is now the executive assistant to Rabbi Bengelsdorf, the director of the OAA in New Jersey—it is she who has encouraged Sandy to participate in the program which encourages America's minorities to become integrated into mainstream society. Oddly enough, the only minority the program seems to be aimed at is young Jewish boys between the ages of 12 and 18. Herman has warned Sandy that the program is a nefarious plot to separate and alienate young Jews from their families, but Sandy, hell-bent on seeing America, has demanded to go.

This passage introduces the Office of American Absorption and its nefarious programs. While the OAA claims to be an organization fighting for the betterment of all Americans and for a stronger American society, in reality, the OAA's aim is to weaken Jewish families and Jewish constituencies. Given all the turmoil surrounding Jewishness in America, it makes sense that Sandy gravitates toward a program which removes him from his Jewish community for a while and allows him—or at least promises to allow him—to inhabit a mainstream American identity for a while.

Over dinner one night, when Sandy was still begging to go to Kentucky against his parents' wishes, Aunt Evelyn accused Herman of being another Jewish person who lives in fear. Evelyn has long been the rebel on Bess's side of the family—30 years old and single, the beautiful Evelyn runs with a group of erudite New Yorkers and has been known to have affairs with married men. Philip writes that his parents did not realize for several months after that dinner that Evelyn was, at the time, having an affair with Bengelsdorf as well—just six months later, the two would be engaged.

Evelyn, too, wants to inhabit a different kind of Jewish identity. She believes—or desperately wants *to believe—that anti-Semitism is nothing but a shadow and that there is nothing for Jewish Americans to be afraid of. This is, of course, Bengelsdorf's rhetoric—rhetoric which many see as harmful or even illegitimate.*

Just days after Sandy leaves for Kentucky, the Roths receive a letter from the War Department in Ottawa—Alvin has been wounded in action and is in a hospital in England. Bess writes a letter to the hospital, and a month later, the Roths get their response. Written by a senior nurse on the unit, the letter states that Alvin has lost his left leg below the knee and that he's uncommunicative.

As the Roths receive the sad news about Alvin, they know their lives are about to change, as they will need to shoulder the burdens of Alvin's trauma when he returns home. His fight for solidarity on behalf of European Jews has ended badly—an omen of more strife to come at home and abroad.

Meanwhile, Sandy writes weekly, sending long letters filled with descriptions of farm life or drawings of animals. When Sandy's summer is up and he arrives home by train, Aunt Evelyn accompanies Herman, Bess, and Philip to pick him up from the station. Sandy is heavier and taller, and his hair has grown lighter. He sports an "outdoorsy" new gait, a husky voice, and most shockingly, a pronounced country drawl. At dinner, as Sandy tells the family all about his summer, Aunt Evelyn is triumphant about her first tangible example of the Just Folks program's success. Everyone else, however, is alarmed by how much Sandy has changed. Bess and Herman in particular are saddened by how reverently Sandy talks about the family he lived with, the Mawhinneys, and how he compares their patriarch's accomplishments to those of his own father. Philip believes his brother resents Herman for being "only a Jew."

Sandy's changed appearance and demeanor—and, most notably, his Bengelsdorf-esque Southern accent—reflect his desire to somehow be both a Gentile and a Jew more like Bengelsdorf. Sandy is contemptuous of his parents' lifestyle and their beliefs, and he clearly conveys this over dinner. Philip is upset by his brother's behavior and sad on behalf of his father. Herman's myriad and impressive accomplishments are now to Sandy—as they likely are to Gentile—merely the accomplishments of a Jew.

After Aunt Evelyn leaves that night, Bess tells Sandy the sad news about Alvin's leg. Sandy almost immediately breaks down in tears and then begins lamenting that Alvin only went to the war because of Herman, who wants all of American to go to war. Herman, who has already gone up to bed for the night, appears at the top of the stairs but doesn't say anything to his son.

This passage shows just how completely Sandy has turned against Herman—and the rhetoric of solidarity to which he subscribes. Sandy is fully on board with Lindbergh's presidency and its policies—he blames Alvin and Herman rather than the actual perpetrators of violence in Europe and Asia.

That night in bed, Philip asks Sandy all about his summer in Kentucky and listens as Sandy rapturously describes life in the country. He reveals that he ate pork and sausage—non-kosher items—and that though he was the first Jew any of the Mawhinneys ever met, they treated him with nothing but kindness. Philip asks Sandy if he's sad to be home, and he says that he is. Philip asks if Sandy will return next year, and Sandy says that he will—even if his parents try to stop him.

Sandy is determined to rebel as profoundly and as often as possible against his Jewish identity. He feels trapped by his family's traditions and ideology and longs for escape through any means necessary.

Weeks later, Bess invites Evelyn and Rabbi Bengelsdorf to dinner to celebrate their engagement. Herman is strongly opposed to welcoming the rabbi for dinner, but Bess insists he put on a pleasant face about it. Herman is angrier than ever lately, and Philip has watched as his father has become slowly consumed by news about the war abroad. Herman predicts that the whole world will fall to fascism because nobody in America is willing to criticize Lindbergh for kowtowing to Hitler.

Between the disastrous trip to Washington, the news of Alvin's grievous injury, and Sandy's painful betrayal, Herman is angrier than ever at the forces of fascism and anti-Semitism which threaten Jewish people in the U.S. and around the world. He has no patience for Lindbergh and Bengelsdorf's ideology. Because of this, welcoming the rabbi into his home—an act that should be a mitzvah *(good deed)—becomes a morally complex undertaking.*

One Thursday evening, Evelyn and Rabbi Bengelsdorf arrive for dinner. Bengelsdorf is charming, complimentary, warm, and he's keenly interested in Sandy—the boy who has "made [them] all so proud" with his participation in Just Folks. Bengelsdorf, who is himself from South Carolina, tells Sandy all about the history of Jews in the American South, suggesting that even Jews in far-flung, remote places can enjoy fruitfulness and success. Aunt Evelyn urges Sandy to share his drawings from Kentucky with the rabbi. Bengelsdorf flips through Sandy's sketchbook, complimenting his work carefully. Sandy speaks lovingly of the things he's rendered. Herman, overwhelmed, gets up from the table and joins Bess in the kitchen, where she is plating food.

In this passage, as Aunt Evelyn and Rabbi Bengelsdorf flatter and praise Sandy, drawing him ever further into their web, Herman can hardly take the betrayal. He is powerless to stop Sandy from buying into Bengelsdorf's ideology—rather than create a small "war" at the dinner table, he chooses to remove himself entirely. Herman is immune to Bengelsdorf's charms—he sees the man as a traitor and a danger to Jews everywhere.

Over dinner, Bengelsdorf launches into a pseudo-sermon in which he describes how American Jews have a unique chance to partake fully in national life. Jewish people, he says, no longer need to live apart from mainstream society. It is his own dream—and Lindbergh's, too—that the Jewish children who participate in the Just Folks program will serve as models not just for one another, but for the adults in their lives as well. Philip is anxious as he waits for his father to stand up to the rabbi as he stood up to the manager, the policeman, and the man in the diner in Washington—but Bengelsdorf is a rabbi, and Herman keeps his mouth shut.

Even as Rabbi Bengelsdorf coolly, slyly makes digs at Herman, Herman refuses to badmouth a rabbi at the dinner table. Bengelsdorf's discussion of Jews integrating into the "mainstream" excludes the major and obvious fact that the problem of Jewish life in America is the anti-Semitism which simmers below the surface—Jews are often unwanted in Gentile spaces, and yet Bengelsdorf believes that by cozying up to Gentiles, Jews can achieve true assimilation.

Over dessert, Bengelsdorf continues pontificating about the issues facing American Jews. He even brings up Alvin's injury, lamenting that Alvin's tale is especially tragic because there was no need for him to go to war. Philip finds himself confused and distraught as he tries to understand how Bengelsdorf can support a president who aligns himself with Hitler. When Bengelsdorf mentions that Alvin is coming home to convalesce with the Roths, Philip becomes even more alarmed—he had not yet realized that Alvin would be staying with them rather than moving back into his old studio apartment. Philip is so upset, in fact, that he doesn't even realize that his father has begun to lay into Bengelsdorf, shouting at him about the war, about Hitler's cruelty, and about the uncertain future that American Jews face.

When Bengelsdorf brings up members of Herman's family—using them as negative examples of what he, Lindbergh, and the Republicans consider "warmongering" and what Herman considers a demonstration of solidarity—Herman flies off the handle. Herman will not have his family insulted or stand by as their values—which he perceives to be the morally right American values—are impinged upon.

Bengelsdorf listens respectfully and thoughtfully as Herman rants. Evelyn, too, maintains her composure, even as Bess grips Herman's hand tightly. Bengelsdorf thinks quietly for a moment before responding. He states, as he did at his Madison Square Garden rally, that all of Lindbergh's dealings with Hitler were done with the intent of spying on the German Air Force on behalf of the U.S. government. All of Lindbergh's anti-Semitic statements before his presidential campaign, Bengelsdorf states, were made from a place of ignorance—now, the president is, according to Bengelsdorf, beginning to appreciate complexity of America's Jewish population. Jews are the ones, Bengelsdorf suggests, who are ignorant as to Lindbergh's true aims.

This passage serves to even more profoundly obscure the truth of what Bengelsdorf believes versus what he has been forced to embody and parrot as a mouthpiece of the Lindbergh administration. Because Bengelsdorf speaks so passionately against his own interests—and touts the goodness and rightness of an anti-Semitic, pro-Nazi president—it seems impossible that he could really believe these things. Yet the idea that he does speaks to how profoundly self-hatred winds its way into the minds of Jews who are exhausted and overwhelmed by the anti-Semitism they've faced at every stage of life.

After continuing a length speech extolling Lindbergh for creating programs that help integrate Jews into American society, Bengelsdorf asks Herman if he has adequately addressed his fears. Herman flatly replies that the rabbi has not done so whatsoever—in fact, Herman says, he is more alarmed than ever. The next day, Evelyn calls Bess to tell her that Sandy has been selected by the rabbi personally as a recruiting officer for the Just Folks program office in New Jersey—Philip knows that this is Bengelsdorf's "revenge."

In this passage, Roth shows how Bengelsdorf wields his power and uses it to further Lindbergh's agenda of breaking up Jewish families. Bengelsdorf takes "revenge" on the "loudmouth" Herman for opposing him so virulently, leaving the Roth family in pieces as they realize they have failed to prevent Sandy from continued involvement with the OAA.

Bess takes a job selling dresses at a department store in town. She tells Philip and Sandy that she has taken the job in preparation for the additional expenses that sheltering Alvin will require. However, the real reason she has taken the job is to funnel her paychecks into a Montreal bank account, preparing for the possibility of a flight to Canada should things get bad for Jewish people in America. With Bess at work, Sandy busy with the OAA, and Herman frequently driving back and forth to go visit Sandy in Montreal, Philip is often alone.

This passage shows how simply living life under the Lindbergh administration divides Jewish families in myriad ways: ideologically, spatially, and emotionally. With a family so spread out and divided, Philip is left to his own devices—and mischief sets in.

Philip starts spending all of his time with his "**stamp** mentor" Earl, getting into all kinds of mischief. Earl is two years older and, because his parents are divorced, he has few rules by which he must abide. Philip and Earl fall into a routine of following people every afternoon after school—they see how far they can go from the neighborhood and still make it back before their mothers notice their absence. Earl and Philip don't just follow anyone, though: they are most curious about Christians. Under Earl's influence, Philip begins stealing money for bus fare from his mother and father so that they can travel around the outskirts of Newark following goyim—Jews, their own people, never interest them.

Philip and Earl are no longer satisfied with sharing their stamp collections after school. They are done simply admiring American iconography and mainstream American life—now, they want to get closer to it and understand it. Their routine of "following Christians" demonstrates their fascination with the group of people for whom life in America is so simple and easy.

Philip is often anxious during his outings with Earl—but more than fearful, he is excited by the lives he observes and the boundaries he tests. As the weather turns cold and the Christmas decorations come out, there seem to be more men to follow than ever. Philip, who has never seen Christmas trees being sold in the open before, is mesmerized as he and Earl follow home Christian men lugging massive pines down the streets. Philip has never associated winter with any particular smell before, but once he smells the fragrant Christmas trees, he realizes that December is different (as many things are) for Christians.

As Philip and Earl continue following Christians each day, Philip comes to understand more and more intimately that his experience of life in America has been different than most people's. He is coming to understand, not for the first time but in a new light, that being a Jew makes him different. For someone who has grown up in a Jewish community surrounded by Jewish friends, this comes as a shock to young Philip.

Philip's final trip with Earl occurs a few days before Christmas vacation. They board a bus and follow a man loaded down with department store bags. They get off at his stop, admiring the large homes and Christmas lights on his block. When Earl points out a figure of Jesus atop a family's Christmas tree, visible in their living room from the street, Philip gets lost in thought. If Jesus hadn't existed, he thinks, there wouldn't be Christians; without Christians, there would be no anti-Semitism; without anti-Semitism, there would be no Hitler. Philip is so deep in thought that he hardly notices when the man he and Earl have been following turns around and calls out to them, inviting them to come into his house for some cocoa. Earl, terrified, tells Philip to run for it—they've encountered a "fairy."

More remarkable than Philip and Earl's possible encounter with a "fairy" (a derogatory term for a homosexual man) who they believe wants to invite them in and take advantage of them is Philip's consideration of how different life is for Christians than it is for Jews. Philip sees Christ—who was himself a Jew—as a totem of an entire worldview and belief system which itself seeks to crush Judaism. The irony of this is too much for Philip to bear.

CHAPTER 4: THE STUMP

In January 1942, having been trained by nurses in Canada to move about on a **prosthetic leg**, Alvin is discharged from the hospital and sent home with a pension and severance. Herman's brother Monty, a rich wholesaler of fruits and vegetables locally known as "the Tomato King," thinks Alvin should stay in Canada, where he could qualify for additional benefits. During a Sunday visit the week before Alvin returns, Monty lambasts Herman for letting Alvin run away to fight in the war. Herman accuses Monty and other "rich Jews" like him of turning a blind eye to the injustices of Lindbergh's administration simply because the market is up.

This passage shows how sensitive Herman is to the wedges and divisions which the Lindbergh administration seeks to drive among members of Jewish families and Jewish constituencies, using wealth and class as a means to break apart Jewish communities.

On the day Alvin arrives home, the Roths go together to meet him at the train station. As Alvin's train pulls in, Herman and Bess warn Philip not to be afraid of Alvin—or of his leg. Sandy rushes down the platform to meet Alvin, who is being pushed off the train in a wheelchair by a nurse. He hugs Alvin tight around the neck. Herman and Bess burst into tears. Meanwhile, Philip feels overwhelmed by his confusing fears about Alvin, Lindbergh, Sandy's involvement with the OAA, and the recent squabbles between Herman and Monty. He robotically moves toward Alvin and hugs him. Philip notices that Alvin's mouth smells terrible. As Philip looks down at Alvin's leg, he sees that Alvin's **prosthesis** is in his luggage rather than attached to this body.

Philip's fears about encountering Alvin's stump are now dwarfed by his much larger fears of all the strife, discord, and danger swirling around in the world. Philip is overwhelmed by all of this, and his reaction to Alvin's homecoming is muted and uncertain. Alvin's detached prosthesis symbolically represents the detached, disoriented state in which he's arriving home.

As the Roths accompany Alvin to collect his baggage, he stands up out of his wheelchair and begins hopping through the station. Sandy, concerned, asks the nurse if Alvin could slip and fall. The nurse, however, assures him that Alvin is exceptional at hopping and that his determination will take him anywhere he wants to go. She has never seen anyone as angry with how things have turned out as Alvin is.

In this passage, Alvin's anger is shown to be a driving and galvanizing force rather than a demoralizing or stultifying one. This foreshadows Alvin's continued anger not at his own circumstances, but at the continuing injustices at home and abroad.

Sandy, Herman, and Alvin load Alvin's luggage into the car while Philip and Bess take the bus home—there is no room in the car for them. Bess, sensing Philip's fear and discomfort, tries to warn Philip that though Alvin is angry, he'll soon return to his old self. All Philip is concerned about, though, is having to look at—or worse, touch or care for—Alvin's stump. Alvin is moving into Philip's room to stay with him while Sandy moves into the guest bedroom. Bess offers to take Philip's place in his room and let him sleep with Herman, or for Philip and Sandy to switch places—but Philip knows he can't allow Alvin, who lost his leg fighting Nazis, to share a room with a boy who is working for Lindbergh.

Philip places Alvin's need above his own in this passage as he becomes determined to protect Alvin from Sandy. In spite of Philip's fears about Alvin's stump, Philip remains in awe of his cousin and of Alvin's values of solidarity and anti-fascism.

After several visits to the family dentist to get his rotted teeth—the source of the foul smell in his mouth—fixed up, Alvin begins smelling better. His stump, however, is deteriorating—cracked and bloodied, it pains Alvin and prevents him from using his prosthetic leg. One night, Alvin wakes up in the middle the night covered in sweat due to a terrible nightmare. When Alvin turns on the light, Philip sees his stump for the first time. Philip asks how long it will take for the stump to heal. Alvin replies that it will take "forever." He explains to Philip the cyclical issues with his **prosthesis** and its fit that he will endure for the rest of his life, and he shows Philip how he needs to keep the stump bandaged. Philip feels less frightened.

Even though Alvin begins healing in tangible and significant ways, the issues and trials he will face for the rest of his life because of his new disability still torture him. His prosthetic leg—and the issues it causes him due to its imperfect fit—are a symbol of the inadequate and imperfect ways in which governments and people respond in times of crises, often failing to support those most in need of help.

The next day, when Philip returns home, Alvin is at the dentist and Sandy is out with Aunt Evelyn. Home alone, Philip decides to play with Alvin's bandages and pretends to wrap up his own leg. When Philip finds that the bandage is dirty, however, he begins to dry heave. He runs down to the cellar to vomit in the laundry sink. Down in the dank cellar in his petrified, disgusted state, Philip is reminded of the underworld of Greek myth. Philip fears the cellar and hates going down there to do laundry of shovel coal into the furnace—he believes that the ghosts of his dead family members live down there.

Philip wants to be a better caretaker to Alvin—yet he is still burdened by his own anxieties and reservations. Philip's fears are still very much a child's fears—even as he tries to hasten the process of growing up by exposing himself to the very things that most frighten him.

While Philip is in the cellar, he hears the pained cough of his family's downstairs neighbor, Mr. Wishnow, who is, like Herman, an insurance agent with Metropolitan Life. Mr. Wishnow has been out sick from work with cancer of the mouth and throat for over a year. The Roths sometimes bring food over to the Wishnows—and Philip often gets roped into playing with Seldon, a chess-loving, nerdish schoolmate of his.

This passage expands the bounds of Philip's world a bit more, introducing new characters who make up Philip's Jewish neighborhood. Philip is scared of Mr. Wishnow, and he detests the needy Seldon—yet these are the people with whom Philip and his family must stand in solidarity.

Within a week, Philip overcomes his squeamishness and begins helping Alvin change his bandages with ease. Soon, Alvin's stump is healed well enough that he can put on his **artificial leg** and walk around. After several days of practicing around the house and in the alleyway, Alvin is able to play football and run errands. Philip helps Alvin take his pants to a seamstress and have hidden zippers installed so that Alvin can more easily get his pants on and off while wearing his prosthesis—in exchange, Alvin awards Philip with the medal he received for his service in the Canadian Army. Philip loves the medal and wears it all the time. As Philip and Alvin grow closer, Philip knows that Alvin must have noticed Sandy's removal from the family and filled in the blanks regarding Sandy's allegiances.

Even as Philip and Alvin grow closer, and as Philip learns to extend empathy and solidarity to those he loves even in tough times, there are still divisions in the Roth family. Alvin was only gone for a short while, yet he tacitly understands the new rifts and schisms which have opened up in his absence—all, of course, due to the divisive politics to which the nation has recently been subjected.

Everyone is happy about Alvin's speedy recovery—but with so much idle time on his hands, Alvin begins wandering the neighborhood and shooting craps with neighborhood youths. Bess and Herman are worried about Alvin's future and believe he should return to school or find a job—after all, he is 22 years old. One afternoon, Philip comes home from school and finds Alvin in the cellar masturbating. Alvin doesn't hear Philip at the top of the stairs, and Philip doesn't know what Alvin is doing—he believes that Alvin is crying, grieving, and releasing in the form of a viscous liquid on the wall a festering embodiment of his grief.

Alvin is getting older—he's not a child anymore, not by a long shot. He clearly craves companionship and friendship, yet he feels isolated and incapable of making smart choices for his future. This passage portends the struggles Alvin will continue to have as he rebels against the very family that has sheltered him, afraid to accept the things they try to bring into his life and instead opting for loneliness.

Uncle Monty comes by to see Alvin one afternoon in January. Monty wastes no time drilling Alvin and urging him to tell the story of how he lost his leg—confronting the tale, Monty suggests, will help Alvin feel better. Alvin says that while stationed in Europe, he shot a German in the middle of the night while waiting for a boat that would evacuate his platoon. The German cried all night—Alvin's shot hadn't killed the man. Alvin at last crawled over to the man and shot him in the head, then spit in his face. German troops threw a grenade at Alvin, and the blast ruined his leg beyond saving. Philip is disappointed by the cowardice he perceives in Alvin's story.

The story of how Alvin lost his leg is not one tinged with heroism or bravery. Alvin instead showed incompetence, pettiness, and vindictiveness as he maimed a German soldier, killed him, and then spit in his face as an act of superiority and disdain—only to get distracted and blown up in the process. Though going to war was an act of solidarity from the outside, it seems as if Alvin sought to release anger and his own personal fear and hatred while fighting abroad.

Monty chides Alvin for his stupidity and shames him for his lack of motivation upon returning home. In spite of his disgust with Alvin, Monty offers Alvin a job at his market, claiming that he would do anything for the son of his dead brother, Jack—Alvin's father. Before leaving, Monty reminds Alvin that the friends who saved him after he was hit by a German grenade didn't risk their lives so he could spend his life shooting craps and lazing about. Alvin is a wreck who must now make something of himself. Alvin doesn't react at all—he simply goes upstairs, gets in bed, and refuses to talk to anyone for the rest of the day. Philip goes down to the cellar to cry.

Though Monty is taking a tough-love approach to trying to force Alvin out of his inertia and get him to reclaim control of his life, the spectacle is hard for the sensitive young Philip to watch. What has happened to Alvin is terrible from every perspective—and witnessing Alvin's profound isolation, his paltry reward for his pursuit of doing the right thing, has made Philip feel hopeless.

CHAPTER 5: NEVER BEFORE

Philip tells the story of how Alvin came to "have it in" for Sandy. One morning, before his stump had healed, Alvin was home alone, walking around the house on his hated crutches. For a moment, he forgot about the crutches—and about his amputation entirely—and tried to walk normally. He fell over, and, in great pain and with no one home alone to help him up, dragged himself to the bedroom. There, as he prepared to haul himself into bed, he spotted Sandy's portfolio beneath the bed—flipping through it, he found the drawings of Lindbergh.

Alvin is enraged by his discovery of Sandy's drawings of Lindbergh—and, it stands to reason, Sandy's lingering admiration of the man. Alvin hates Lindbergh and feels betrayed by Sandy, who no doubt admires the aviator-turned-president for the wrong reasons.

Alvin realizes that Sandy—and many other Jews in Newark—don't just tolerate but are beginning to actively support Lindbergh, given that none of the fearful things Jews predicted when he ascended to office have come to pass. This makes Alvin angry and withdrawn. Many local Jews attribute Lindbergh's even treatment of Jewish people to the influence of Rabbi Bengelsdorf—the man who is about to become an uncle by marriage to Sandy and Philip.

Alvin is frustrated that just because anti-Semitic legislation hasn't passed and anti-Semitic violence isn't noticeably on the rise, those around him think everything is fine. Alvin doesn't want to forget the truth of the times he's living in—or what he's sacrificed in hopes of changing them.

Alvin is rarely home anymore—Philip misses Alvin and realizes that he had begun to use Alvin as a kind of stand-in for the aloof Sandy, who is now constantly off on speaking engagements with Aunt Evelyn. Now that Alvin is recovered, he has taken up dangerous habits which perturb Philip—but Philip can also recognize that Alvin is just trying to get out of the house. Alvin himself is disturbed by Herman's increasing obsession with reading grim war reports aloud each night after dinner. Herman interprets Alvin's avoidance of these sessions as his nephew's indifference.

This passage shows how the Roths begin to divide and break down even further as unspoken resentments and attachments fester and change. Alvin is perturbed by Herman's behavior, while Philip is, in turn, perturbed by Alvin's absence from the house in favor of hanging with a gang of youths. The Roths, on edge due to the strife in the world, find their relationships with one another strained and altered.

One March afternoon, Philip wanders to the abandoned street near the school playground where Alvin often shoots craps with his friends. Alvin is there gambling with six other boys—among them is Alvin's friend Shushy Margulis, a 30-year-old runner for a local bookie who works out of an office near a Catholic orphanage which stands on a large patch of land owned by the local diocese and populated by several horses. Shushy's uncle is the "Pinball King" of all illegal slots in Philadelphia.

Alvin is hanging with a rough crowd—yet Philip, who admires and looks up to Alvin, finds himself drawn intensely to Alvin even in the face of his cousin's upsetting new habits and mysterious new lifestyle.

Months ago, Alvin taught Philip how to shoot craps one night after everyone else in the house had gone to sleep. Though Philip wanted to learn the tricks of the trade then, as he comes upon Alvin now with his crooked friends, Philip is flooded with anger on behalf of his parents and his brother—he hates that they must all endure so much for Alvin to throw his life away with his little gang. Still, when Alvin asks Philip to blow on his dice for him, Philip obliges him. After his roll, Alvin wins the pot, and after pulling himself up slowly—his **prosthesis**, Philip can tell, is ailing him—he gives two $10 bills to Philip.

Even though Philip admires Alvin and hangs on his every word, his allegiance is still to his parents—and he feels that Alvin is spitting in the face of their generosity and good faith by wasting his time. For Alvin, shooting craps doesn't even seem to be about the money, evidenced by how he gives his winnings away to Philip—he just wants the companionship and the distraction.

Philip walks home alone, leaving Alvin with his friends. He stops to pet the horses, wishing he could ride them far away. Philip bursts out in anger, screaming "Nazi fucking bastard Lindbergh" at the horses before turning and running away, heading for home as fast as he can.

Philip's rage boils over in this short scene as he directs his anger, confusion, and uncertainty at an empty field. Just as Alvin uses craps as an outlet and Herman uses the news, Philip must find a reservoir for his anger, too.

As Philip rounds the corner onto his street, a man in a suit sidles up beside him and addresses him by name. The man tells Philip that he works for the FBI, and he even pulls out a badge. Philip insists that he can't answer any questions—he's on his way home. Philip is afraid of the agent finding the money Alvin has given him. The FBI agent assures Philip that he's on Philip's side—he just wants to ask him some questions about how Alvin is doing. He asks if Philip has come from the playground where Alvin and Shushy are shooting craps and if he'll tell the agent what the boys were talking about, specifically asking if they mentioned the president or about running away to Canada. Philip, anxious and tongue tied, says the boys weren't talking about anything of the sort.

In this passage, another surreal figure of Americana—the shadowy FBI agent—creeps into Philip's life. The agent is clearly interested in Alvin's activities and ideals—and whether he and his gang of crooks are cooking up an anti-government plot. This passage shows just how distrustful the government is now of its Jewish citizens—far-off fears have become stark reality.

The agent continues pressing Philip, asking if the boys mentioned Hitler or called anyone "fascist." Philip becomes afraid that the agent overheard him swearing at the horses. As the agent continues questioning Philip about Aunt Evelyn, Philip gives short, simple answers—the agent tells Philip that he knows Philip is too clever to reveal too much. He urge Philip to "go home and eat [his] matzohs." Philip runs as fast as he can toward home.

The FBI agent's relentless questioning of Philip about several members of his family—and his anti-Semitic stereotyping about Philip eating his matzohs (Jewish dumplings)—suggests that Philip is not safe any longer even in his own neighborhood walking the streets he's called home since birth.

As Philip arrives at the house, he sees three police cars and an ambulance parked out front. Philip has never seen all the neighborhood kids gathered as they are now on the street, huddled together and looking frightened. As Philip approaches them, he learns that Mr. Wishnow is dead—he has hung himself in his closet, and Seldon was the one who found the body. The kids report that the body has not yet been brought out from the house—they're waiting to see it.

The afternoon's surreal events continue to take turn after turn for the worse when Philip arrives home to find the chaos of Mr. Wishnow's death has subsumed the neighborhood. Philip is disoriented and frightened as he is confronted with image after image of the surreal and unimaginable. The chapter's title, "Never Before," is fitting: it is full of things that would have never seemed possible before life under Lindbergh.

Philip is shocked when, moments later, Bess emerges from the Wishnows'—Philip fears for a moment that it is his own father who has committed suicide. As the coroners wheel a body out of the house, Philip runs toward it, crying. Bess grabs him and comforts him, insisting that Mr. Wishnow died of complications from his cancer. She assures him that his father will be home soon and that there is nothing to be afraid of.

Philip is so disoriented and frightened that he believes the worst has happened. With everything all around him so unstable and unprecedented, it makes sense that Philip's fears spiral out of control easily.

There is, however, plenty to be afraid of. Philip learns that the FBI agent who questioned him has also stopped by his mother's work to question her and his father's office to question him, and even boarded Sandy's bus home from Aunt Evelyn's office to question him—all because of Alvin's association with Shushy. Bess feels sad for Alvin, who has become lazy and bitter because of his injury, but Herman insists that if Alvin continues running with a bad crowd, he'll have to move out.

The FBI agent's questioning of each individual member of the Roth family sets them all collectively on edge. While the agent claims to be questioning them over their connections to Shushy, the Roths are living in frightening and unpredictable times—they know that there could be many other reasons for their collective and individual suspicion.

After dinner, Bess and Herman take food to Mrs. Wishnow and Seldon. Philip tells Sandy the rumor he heard about Mr. Wishnow having committed suicide. Sandy is skeptical and tells Philip he's wrong. Philip admits to himself that he doesn't know up from down or bad from good anymore. Lately, everything lately feels like a dream. Philip feels he is going to faint, though he never has before. Philip feels that "never before" is "the great refrain of 1942." Philip vomits into the sink, then takes to bed with a high fever for over a week.

The "great refrain" of 1942 is "never before"—and the phrase makes clear the thematic underpinning of many of this chapter's disconnected events. This is a time of rapid, terrifying change—anything could happen at any moment. At such a young age, Philip is unprepared to handle the emotional instability, and so he suffers a small breakdown.

The following Sunday, Philip wakes up alone in his room. He can hear Alvin and Uncle Monty talking in the kitchen—Monty is again attacking Alvin, calling him a bum and a good-for-nothing. Philip listens as Alvin wearily accepts the job at the produce market and agrees to stop hanging around with Shushy and gambling, then bursts into tears and apologizes for his terrible behavior.

While Philip has been sick in bed, it seems as if things have changed for the better. It appears that Alvin at last wants to take control of his life and that his family's concern has finally gotten through to him.

A week into Alvin's job at the market, the FBI agent arrives at the grocery with several other agents to ask around about Alvin, insinuating to everyone who works there that Alvin is plotting to assassinate Lindbergh. Alvin is fired on the spot. Herman calls Monty to ask how Monty could have capitulated to the FBI's ludicrous charges—but Monty states that because of Longy Zwillman, a Newark gangster who runs the rackets on truckers and merchants like Monty, Monty had no choice but to fire Alvin and keep the FBI from snooping around a business that's in cahoots with Longy. Within 24 hours of losing his job, Alvin clears out and moves to Philadelphia to work for Shushy's uncle.

The episode which takes place in this passage completely shatters Alvin's faith in the straight-and-narrow path. If he could be accused of a plot against America simply for expressing discontent with Lindbergh and heading to Canada to fight for what's right, he reasons that there's no reason to toe the line—he might as well surrender to a life of crime.

In the spring of 1942, President Lindbergh and Mrs. Lindbergh hold a state dinner at the white house in honor of the Nazis' Foreign Minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop—the negotiator who was at Hitler's side during the drafting of the Iceland Understanding. The liberal press decries the White House's decision, and even Roosevelt makes his first nationwide address since leaving office to urge the administration to rescind their invitation. Vice President Wheeler—a former Democrat turned founding member of the America First movement—mocks Roosevelt's "irresponsible" entry into the issue.

As Lindbergh's administration continues making shows of good faith to the Nazis, divisions throughout the country deepen and widen. Many believe the White House's tolerance of Nazis is unacceptable—while others loyal to Lindbergh malign any of his detractors.

The weekend after the White House's announcement, the German American Bund holds a rally at Madison Square Garden—over 25,000 people turn out in support of Lindbergh. The Bund is a fascist fellowship disguised as an anti-Communist organization rather than a pro-Nazi one. Though their anti-Semitic propaganda including banners calling for the smashing of "Jewish communists" and buttons decrying the "Jewish war" have been band from the rally, the energy of the gathering is no less frightening than the group's former rallies have been.

This passage shows how the White House's legitimization of the Third Reich and its extension of courtesies to the Nazis allows for anti-Semitic organizations to flourish and thrive in the open, believing they have been given the green light by their own government to spew messages of hate.

Soon after the Bund rally, the Democrats hold a Madison Square Garden rally of their own. FDR himself speaks out against both Lindbergh and Hitler decrying the former's "shameless courting" of the latter. In response, Lindbergh goes on a flying tour of America, giving speeches across the country in which he boasts that not a single American has had to go to war because of his policymaking. Lindbergh never once mentions von Ribbentrop, the Nazis, or Hitler.

Even as many Americans wake up to Lindbergh's feckless policies, Lindbergh himself seeks to defend himself to his supporters—the very same antiwar, America First voters who value American exemption from the war above all other ethics and ideas.

Shepsie Tirschwell, one of Herman's childhood friends, is a projectionist at the Newsreel Theater—Newark's only all-news movie house. Shepsie and his coworkers daily splice together new reels to keep their patrons up to date on worldwide happenings—Herman goes about once a week to see a show and often brings Sandy and Philip along, as Shepsie lets the boys in for free. Philip, now nine, loves these outings to the theater—even now, as an adult, the broadcasts of the Bund rally, FDR's own Madison Square Garden rally, and Lindbergh's plane tour stand out in his mind. Sandy, however, doesn't enjoy going—he only accompanies his father when he's made to do so.

While many neighbors and old friends like Herman and Shepsie continue to bond over their shared anxiety about the direction that not just America, but the entire world, is taking, others like Sandy choose to keep their heads in the sand because it's easier to do. Philip finds himself mesmerized by the news—his terror, it seems, has given way to sheer disbelief.

Philip, influenced by something Alvin said before leaving home, has come to see Sandy, Aunt Evelyn, and the "great" Rabbi Bengelsdorf as opportunists. Philip believes that Sandy, having realized his unusual potential to be someone of importance, is greatly enjoying extolling the virtues of Just Folks and the OAA.

Philip has learned the vocabulary to describe his frustration with Sandy, Evelyn, and Bengelsdorf from Alvin—but the dissatisfaction and disappointment are all his own. Philip doesn't believe in selling out one's identity or beliefs for fame, fortune, or favor.

In March, Rabbi Bengelsdorf and Aunt Evelyn receive invitations to the White House's dinner for von Ribbentrop. Bess and Herman, having already tried and failed to convince Evelyn to keep her distance from the Lindbergh administration, don't know what to do to keep her from going. They write Evelyn off as crazy, but when she calls to tell them that she wants for Sandy to accompany her as an emissary of Just Folks, Herman flies off the handle and tells her to leave their family alone. He forbids Sandy from going to the dinner—even as Sandy protests that it is a "great opportunity."

This passage shows that just as Evelyn and Bengelsdorf have been dazzled—some, like Alvin, would say bought—by the Lindbergh administration, Sandy, too, longs to abandon his identity and enjoy the praise and the spotlight that the OAA has given him. Sandy is only interested in his own advancement—not in solidarity with his people, his community, or his family.

Later that night, Evelyn shows up at the house demanding to be let in. She tries to explain what an honor it is for Sandy to be invited to such an event, but Herman insists that as long as a Nazi is president, he doesn't have any interest in it. Herman and Evelyn quarrel terribly, and eventually, Herman opens the back door to the stairwell and orders Evelyn to leave his house and never come back. Bess begs Herman not to react so intensely—but she, too, turns to Evelyn and urges her to go home. Bess walks Evelyn out the door as Herman slams it shut on both of them.

This fight is yet one more example of the profound moral and ideological rifts that have erupted within the Roth family. Herman cannot bear Evelyn and Sandy's opportunism or their rejection of their pasts, their culture, their family, and their community.

When Bess does not return, Herman, Sandy, and Philip—none of whom have uttered a word to one another for over an hour—go out looking for her. They go down to the Wishnows' and ask if they've seen Bess, but Seldon and Mrs. Wishnow say they haven't. Philip's aversion to Seldon is worse than ever—he avoids him at school and in the building, and he's unhappy to see him now. Philip experiences a moment of deep fear in which he imagines that his mother has run away forever, leaving Herman to marry Mrs. Wishnow and make Seldon a part of Philip's life forever. Philip wishes he could run away with Alvin.

Though Philip hasn't abandoned his family emotionally or ideologically, he's now witnessed three people who have—and at even the imagination of the slightest change or inconvenience, Philip's instinct is now to flee.

Hours later, Bess calls the house—she has brought Evelyn home and put her to bed. She reports that she has spoken with Bengelsdorf on the phone—he has implied that he will never forget how Herman has treated Evelyn after all he has done for Sandy. Herman goes out in the car to pick Bess up. When he brings her home, she comes into Philip and Sandy's room and sits on the edge of Philip's bed. She can tell he is exhausted. She calmly tells Sandy that they need to talk things out. She explains that Aunt Evelyn has made a mistake getting involved with Bengelsdorf and the OAA—Bess doesn't want Sandy, like Evelyn, to become "overexcited" and lose all perspective. Bess kisses Philip goodnight and leaves the room.

Bess tries to be calm and even-handed as she confronts Sandy about the gravity of his choices—and Aunt Evelyn and Bengelsdorf's choices, too, for that matter. However, this passage implies that Sandy will not respond so generously to Bess and Herman's ruling—being in the OAA has allowed him to feel special and admired for the first time in his life, and he does not want that feeling to go away.

The next morning, Philip and Sandy are surprised when they go into the kitchen for breakfast and find that Herman hasn't left for work yet. He's stayed home a little late, he says, to explain thoroughly to Sandy why he is not going to the White House—and why he is no longer to participate, in any way, in any programs sponsored by the OAA. Herman insists that one day, Sandy will understand the depths of evil to which every member of the Nazi Party has sunk. Sandy, however, replies only that he'll never forgive Herman.

Sandy cannot grasp the gravity of what his involvement with the OAA signifies no matter how many times his parents attempt to get through to him. Sandy's resistance allows Roth to illustrate the allures of morally corrupt people like Bengelsdorf and Evelyn and ideologically corrupt institutions like the OAA—their aims are nefarious, but their veneers are attractive and enveloping.

Bess warns Sandy that what Herman is saying is true, and that it's time for their family to try returning to normalcy. Sandy counters by asking when Bess is planning on moving them all to Canada based on her deluded belief that they're being persecuted. Herman orders Sandy to shut his mouth. Sandy tells Herman that he is a "dictator worse than Hitler." Herman, stunned, turns away—but Bess reaches out and strikes Sandy across the face. It is the first time either Sandy or Philip has ever been hit. Sandy turns to his mother and tells her that he is going to the White House with Aunt Evelyn whether "you ghetto Jews like it or not." Bess hits Sandy again, this time harder, and Sandy bursts into tears. Philip grabs his backpack and runs out of the house.

The violence and anger that seize the Roths in this scene is painful to behold—too painful, in fact, for Philip to bear. Sandy is furious with his parents and uses the worst language he can imagine to try and insult and hurt them while simultaneously differentiating himself from the people he perceives as paranoid and ghettoized, or cut off from the rest of society.

A couple of weeks later, Herman goes to the Newsreel to watch the footage of the von Ribbentrop dinner. When he arrives, he learns that Shepsie and his family are planning on fleeing to a Jewish community in Winnipeg—his constant exposure to the footage from around the world has convinced him that fascism will soon come to America. When Herman comes home that night, he doesn't tell his family about Shepsie's decision—but he lambasts the smug, happy way Evelyn and Bengelsdorf looked in the footage from the White House's dinner. He questions how such horrible things could be happening in America. Sandy declares that nothing is happening in America and leaves the table.

Even in the face of the real-life consequences of America's conciliatory relationships with fascists, Sandy refuses to believe that anything tangible or real is happening to change the country. Sandy has been blinded, as many have, to the more insidious threats of anti-Semitism and isolationism, and his mind cannot be changed. For many Jews in the Roths' neighborhood, however, the unbelievable emotional truths they've feared are quickly becoming reality.

Philip is unsettled by Sandy's behavior. He begins to worry that Sandy will soon run away from home and perhaps flee to Kentucky to live with the Mawhinneys. After dinner, rather than following Sandy to their room, Philip stays in the kitchen to do his homework at the table. He overhears his father quietly telling his mother about the Tirschwells, stressing that the anti-Semitic leaders who run the government want Jewish families to flee. Herman believes their family should stay put—he still has faith in America and American justice. Bess is upset. Herman tells her that if the congressional elections in November tip the courts and the House to the right, they can consider leaving.

In spite of everything—even the Tirschwells' imminent departure—Herman still stubbornly believes that he should not have to relinquish his right to an American life. Herman is clinging to his belief that things can be redeemed—but for Bess, waiting for the worst to happen feels endless and increasingly unsustainable.

The next day, after school, Philip goes to the Newsreel Theater instead of heading home, desperate to see the footage of Evelyn at the White House. He is appalled that someone in his own family could behave the way Evelyn is behaving. At the box office, the attendant refuses Philip a ticket until he claims he lives at the nearby Catholic orphanage. He has even carefully written out a permission slip from a nun. He pays for his ticket with one of Alvin's $10 bills, receiving $9.50 in change, and hurries to take his seat in the theater. As he watches the "horrors" on the news, he becomes frightened and disoriented. When Evelyn and Bengelsdorf at last appear on screen during the coverage of the dinner, Philip feels that they are less real and more unbelievable than anything else he's seen.

As Philip watches the show at the Newsreel, he finds himself somehow more disoriented by the images of his Aunt Evelyn and uncle-by-marriage Rabbi Bengelsdorf attending a dinner honoring a Nazi than by the disturbing and harrowing images of Nazi violence across Europe. Of course, the two things are connected. In seeing the evil deeds the Nazis perpetrate against Jews in such stark relief against the submission with which Jewish people like Evelyn and Bengelsdorf treat the very villains who detest them, Philip encounters a profound and disturbing mental disconnect.

When the show is over, an attendant pulls Philip from his seat and brings him up to the projection booth where Shepsie is waiting, holding the fake note in his hand. Shepsie tells Philip that he's already called Herman, who is on his way to pick him up. Philip, close to crying, begs to go home on his own—all he wanted, he says, was to see footage of his aunt. When Philip begins crying, Shepsie angrily says that Philip doesn't have a legitimate reason to cry since horrible things are happening all over the world. Soon, though, Shepsie softens and hands Philip a handkerchief.

Shepsie's perceived cruelty toward Philip is actually the man's attempt to protect the young boy from the horrors of what's really happening in the world. Though Philip occasionally attends news shows with his father, to see such images alone is painful—and Shepsie is angry with himself for not having caught Philip on the way in and protected him.

Philip asks why Shepsie is going to Canada. Shepsie replies simply that he has secured a new job there. Philip knows Shepsie is lying to spare him, and this frightens him more. Philip continues crying until his father arrives 20 minutes later. Herman takes Philip by the elbow, leads him out of the theater, and smacks him in the street in full view of the bustling downtown crowds. Philip cries uncontrollably—he notices confused Gentiles walking by enjoying a "carefree spring [afternoon] in Lindbergh's peacetime America."

Philip is frightened by Shepsie's refusal to admit the truth they both already know: things are not safe for Jews in America any longer. Philip cries as his father reprimands him, but not because of the reprimand alone: Philip is at last completely overwhelmed by the disconnect between his existence and the unburdened, "carefree" existences of non-Jewish people.

CHAPTER 6: THEIR COUNTRY

On May 22nd of 1942, the Roths receive a letter from Metropolitan Life informing them that under the OAA's new Homestead 42 act, their family will be relocated to rural Danville, Kentucky in September. The letter states that just as the Homestead Act of 1862 provided "exciting new opportunities" to Americans willing to venture westward, Homestead 42 gives "emerging American families" the opportunity to move west. The letter congratulates the Roths on being chosen out of a number of worthy candidates.

Despite the OAA's deceptive language of "new opportunities" and "emerging" families, their latest program is a transparent ploy to move Jewish families out of their neighborhoods. Their aim is seemingly to weaken both Jewish communities and constituencies while isolating Jews amongst Gentiles.

When Herman tells Sandy, Philip, and Bess the news, Bess becomes panicked. She knows that in the town of Danville, whose population is 6,700, there will be no other Jews. Herman, however, is calm and resigned—he says that many other families are being relocated and that Kentucky will perhaps be better for them than Montana, Kansas, or Oklahoma. Herman tries to highlight the positives, but Bess is irate. She knows how alienated she felt as a child, and she points out how hard she has worked to make sure that her children go to school with other Jewish children and feel grounded in a Jewish community. She is mad that this is how she's being repaid for all her hard work.

Bess, who grew up as the only Jewish girl in a Gentile neighborhood, has worked hard all her life to make sure that her children have the support of a Jewish community—now, she feels all that is being taken away from her, and she is right. Herman is resigned to their fate, but Bess refuses to believe that her life is about to change in such a way.

Herman tells the boys that they can ask him any questions they want or express any concerns they have. Sandy, though, is delighted about the move—Danville is just 14 miles from the Mawhinneys' farm. Philip is frightened—he knows that Herman sealed their family's fate the second he ordered Aunt Evelyn to leave and never come back. He is determined to never leave his beautiful neighborhood.

Philip rightly sees the Roths' "selection" for participation Homestead 42 as yet another method of Bengelsdorf's underhanded revenge. He knows that in spite of Sandy's joy, something deeply nefarious is happening to his family.

After dinner, Herman and Bess talk about the upsetting news. Bess remains fixated on the idea of being the only Jewish family in town. She has no interest in befriending "Gentile women" who will be nice to her face but harbor anti-Semitic thoughts behind her back. She declares that the government cannot force them to move—the government cannot make Jews do something just because of their religion. Sandy mocks Bess for her paranoia and then gets up and heads to the bedroom. Abandoned by Alvin, disappointed in Sandy, and frightened by his father's impotence and his mother's panic, Philip feels he is the only one who can protect his family.

Bess's anger and fear arouse nothing but contempt in Sandy and little more than pity in Herman. Philip is the only one who feels galvanized by the sight of his brave, fearless mother breaking down, and he resolves to do whatever he can to help his family escape their fate.

The next day after school, Philip gets on the downtown bus and goes to Aunt Evelyn's office. Philip heads inside and tells the receptionist who he is. In no time, Aunt Evelyn comes down the hall and wraps Philip up in hugs and kisses. Philip tells her about going to see footage of at the White House dinner at the Newsreel, and Evelyn begins describing the event in great detail. Philip congratulates himself on tricking Evelyn into believing that he has come here to hear all about the dinner.

Philip knows that Aunt Evelyn is not the woman he once knew—and because of this, he is able to play into her vanity and wind his way into her good graces.

Philip spots a signed picture of the President and Mrs. Lindbergh together in the Oval Office, as well as one of Evelyn shaking Lindbergh's hand. Philip realizes that Evelyn's "shameless vanity"—and the vanity of those just like her—is determining the fate of millions. Philip asks Evelyn if she met von Ribbentrop—she nods and coyly states that she even danced with him. Evelyn shows Philip more pictures from the event, pointing out the glamorous evening bag, festoon necklace, and large engagement ring she wore to the dinner. Evelyn, wrapped up in excitement, hugs Philip close again. When she releases Philip, he asks her if she knows he's moving to Kentucky. She says she does. Philip says he doesn't want to go.

Philip is disgusted by Evelyn's shamelessness. Even at his young age, he can see very transparently that she has chosen to sell out her community and her family in exchange for glitz and glamour, and he is perturbed that she could be so blind to the true consequences of what she's doing.

Aunt Evelyn's demeanor changes sharply. She asks Philip who has sent him to see her, and he tells her that no one has. Evelyn coldly tells Philip that there's nothing to be afraid of in Kentucky. Philip asks if Seldon and Mrs. Wishnow can go instead, and Evelyn again asks if someone has put him up to visiting her. Philip insists that he came alone to ask for Evelyn to send the Wishnows instead of Philip and his own family. Aunt Evelyn points out a large map showing all the relocations that are planned. She explains that she has no control over the plans—but that even if she did, she'd still insist on the Roths leaving "the ghetto."

Aunt Evelyn is deeply paranoid—but, unlike Bess, she's not afraid of bad things befalling Jews, but of her own power and influence being repossessed. Evelyn knows that her power rests on being able to convince Jews in her community and in her own family, too, that the OAA has their best interest at heart—and that any other belief is just ghettoized, small-minded paranoia.

Evelyn reaches into her desk and comes around to where Philip is sitting. Philip senses a manic expression on Evelyn's face as she tells him to be brave and go along with the move—she insists he can't grow up to be frightened like his parents. She hands him a package and explains that it contains a chocolate—she has brought it for him from the White House dinner. She gives him one for Sandy, too, then asks what Seldon's last name is. Philip tells her. Evelyn asks if Seldon is his best friend. Philip, paralyzed by fear, says that he is. Philip takes the chocolates home and disposes of them, throwing them over the orphanage fence. A few days later, the Wishnows receive a letter stating that they have been chosen for an exciting opportunity out west.

This passage once again encapsulates the breadth of Aunt Evelyn's newfound power—and Philip's determination to resist it at all costs. While Philip throws away the chocolates she gives him, seeing them as a symbol of traitorous behavior, he is rejecting her power over him. However, as Aunt Evelyn secures the Wishnows' relocation within days, it becomes clear that Philip is one of the few people immune to her influence.

At the end of May, Herman and Bess host a small group of concerned Jewish MetLife agents and their wives. Mrs. Wishnow drops Philip, Sandy, and Seldon off at a movie theater in the next town over. The group of adults—most of whom have grown up in the same place and long subscribed to the same values—invite a local rabbi to sit with them as they discuss what is going on in America. The adults are people Philip has known all his life—they are Jews whose Jewishness is a natural part of who they are. None of Philip's parents' friends or neighbors have any desire to deny or change who they are, no matter the consequences.

In this passage, Roth suggests that there is still hope. As long as there are communities of Jews willing to stand in solidarity with one another and remember the values they've been taught—and the identity which forms the basis of their being—the threat of anti-Semitism will be staunchly, steadfastly opposed.

Sitting in the movie with Seldon, Philip dreads the move to Kentucky even more intensely—he knows that Seldon will likely be his only companion. Confronted with the prospect of isolation with Seldon, Philip feels compelled to rebel. Over the last several weeks, he has been stealing from Seldon each time Bess makes Philip play with him. He is taking Seldon's clothing and stowing it in a cardboard suitcase in the cellar. One recent afternoon, Philip found he'd gathered enough items to dress up as Seldon—but after doing so and looking at himself in the mirror in the cellar, he felt like a freak. Philip quickly took the clothes off, stuffed them back into the suitcase, and added in the $19.50 left from the money Alvin gave him. Even Philip doesn't know exactly why he's packed the suitcase.

Even as Philip claims to loathe Seldon and wish to get as far away from him as possible, there is a part of him that remains fascinated by and drawn to the boy. Just as Philip followed Christians with Earl to learn more about the people he had begun to perceive as enemies, he now seeks to learn something from the hated Seldon, too.

Seldon is perplexed and distressed by the loss of his clothing. Bess, who has heard what's happening from Mrs. Wishnow but who is clueless as to what's going on, suggests that Philip give Seldon some clothes to replace the ones he's mysteriously lost. Philip tells his mother he doesn't want Seldon walking around in his clothes, but Bess is so upset by Philip's selfishness that he gives in and offers up an outfit to Seldon—on the condition Seldon leave him alone.

Philip claims to be fed up with Seldon, but in reality, there is a part of him that seems to draw strength from Seldon's presence. Philip has tried to send Seldon away, and it hasn't worked—but there is something about his fascination with Seldon that toes the delicate line between hate and affection.

When Philip, Sandy, and Seldon return home from the movies, they enjoy leftover deli sandwiches from the meeting and listen to the radio. For a moment, their lives feel intact and they feel comforted by the familiar rituals of their childhood. But as Philip sits with Seldon and watch him eats, he grows increasingly apprehensive about what will happen when their two families move to Kentucky.

Philip sees Seldon in this scene for the first time not as an enemy or an outsider, but as a comrade—as someone who will soon be his only partner and companion in a new, unprecedented world.

That night at nine, Walter Winchell comes on the radio. Herman has been perturbed for weeks by Winchell's failure to report on Homestead 42 and recently went so far as to write a letter begging the host to discuss the matter—but Bess, fearful that the letter would be intercepted and send to the FBI, discouraged Herman from mailing it. Herman reacted to what he perceived as Bess's ongoing paranoia by declaring that he would not run away or hide within his own country—Bess, however, retorted that the country now belongs to Lindbergh and the goyim. Sandy told Philip, alone in their room that night, that their parents are "paranoid ghetto Jews."

The Roths' ongoing conversations about the reality of the threats of anti-Semitic government emissaries and agencies are frustrating for all of them. Herman wants to express himself and defend his rights, while Bess wishes that Herman would help their family to be less conspicuous. Sandy discounts the whole thing as hogwash and calls his parents "paranoid ghetto Jews," which betrays his own internalized anti-Semitism. Meanwhile, Philip is stuck at the center of it all, and he's too young to do anything but watch his family descend into chaos and animosity. In this way, the OAA's agenda to break up Jewish families is working.

As Winchell comes on the radio the night of the adults' meeting, Philip gets into bed. He doesn't want to hear any more of the anxious talk. The night is warm, though, and Philip can't sleep—he hears every word of Winchell's broadcast. Winchell begins discussing Homestead 42 at last. He suggests that Homestead 42 Jews might end up in concentration camps—and states that at the very least the Lindbergh administration is actively working to separate and alienate American Jews, placing them in peril in far-flung regions where their neighbors might very well turn against them overnight. Winchell concludes the first segment of his broadcast by stating that he believes Lindbergh has agreed to Homestead 42 in exchange for a negotiation with Hitler stating that the *Führer* will spare England from invasion.

The always-controversial Winchell makes some serious, bold statements on his broadcast—statements which implicate Lindbergh in a plot with the Nazis to enact Third Reich-esque "solutions" to Judaism in America. Winchell's claims may seem extremist or paranoid to some—but to the Roths, who have witnessed firsthand the deepening presence of anti-Semitism in their daily lives, the statements provide relief and validation.

As an advertisement comes on, Philip hears Sandy begin screaming at the radio, calling Winchell a liar and excoriating Herman for listening to Winchell's nonsense. Sandy insists he lived in Kentucky and that there's nothing to be afraid of—yet still, he says, "you people believe him." Herman reprimands Sandy for acting as if he's not Jewish as well, threatening to drive him to Penn Station and send him away on the next train Kentucky if he continues talking that way.

Even when confronted with Winchell's broadcast, which excavates and lays bare the very real fears of countless Jews across America, Sandy remains determined to deny anything that threatens Lindbergh's legitimacy. The fact that he now refers to his family as "you people" indicates that he wants to distance himself from his parents and other Jews.

The Roths' phone begins ringing off the hook—Bess and Herman answer calls from their concerned neighbors, all of whom want to discuss the Winchell broadcast. Having overheard their calls—and Herman and Bess's private debriefing afterward—Philip makes what he feels is a sound, even-headed decision. He wants to run away from home. He descends to the cellar, opens up the suitcase, and changes into some of Seldon's clothes. He feels determined to resist the "disaster" which has swept up his friends and family. The last thing Philip grabs before leaving the house is his **stamp album**—but shortly after he steps out of the house and starts down the street toward the horse-filled orphanage grounds, his memory goes blank.

Philip is profoundly affected by all the turmoil in his household. Frightened of what's to come and desperate to avoid having to bear witness to things as they deteriorate further, Philip gathers his most precious things and runs away—but soon encounters an unforeseen wrinkle in his plan.

Philip wakes up the next morning in the nearby Beth Israel Hospital—his parents are standing over him. His head hurts, and his doctor tells him that he likely has a concussion: he was kicked by a horse while walking through the orphanage grounds. Bess tells him that Seldon heard Philip sneaking out of the house and followed him down the street and onto the land owned by the orphanage. Seldon watched as a startled horse, running from Philip, kicked Philip in the head. Seldon immediately ran home for help. Bess tells Philip that Seldon saved his life. While helping to save Philip, Seldon also discovered that Philip was the culprit behind his missing clothes.

Philip's escape plan has gone horribly wrong. The uncanniness of being derailed by a kick from a horse echoes the unbelievable, surreal nature of everything else that's happening in Philip's life. The failed escape attempt is so bizarre—and has failed so spectacularly—that Philip even manages to escape punishment for the additional oddity of having stolen Seldon's clothes.

Philip is devastated and ashamed—but even worse than the shame of being discovered is the pain he feels when he realizes that his **stamp collection** is gone. When Philip tells Bess that he took them with him to run away—and that they weren't with the suitcase when it was found—Bess goes out into the woods behind the orphanages and searches for them. She cannot find them, and Philip is inconsolable. He has visions of a mob of orphans tearing the stamp album apart, hating it because it isn't theirs—because nothing is theirs. After putting the money she found in Philip's pants into a savings account for him, Bess makes one more trip to the grounds to comb them for any remnant of the stamp album.

In spite of Philip's naughtiness in trying to run away, his mother is infinitely sympathetic to the loss of his stamp collection. Bess perhaps sees the symbolic loss for what it is: the loss of Philip's innocence, the destruction of his idyllic American childhood, and the decisive moment in which he realizes that just as the orphans have nothing, a fate of destitution and loneliness could easily become his own.

CHAPTER 7: THE WINCHELL RIOTS

After Philip gets home from the hospital, he realizes that something significant has changed nearly overnight: his father has quit his job at MetLife and gone to work at Uncle Monty's market in order to dodge the edicts of Homestead 42. Herman takes the night shift, which means he sleeps during the day and leaves the house for work each night at five. Philip, Sandy, and Bess must all be careful not to disturb Herman, who now sleeps odd hours. Life becomes hard for all of them, and Herman starts drinking.

The changes in Philip and his family's daily lives continue mounting with alarming speed. Herman's resignation from MetLife signals that in spite of his wish to stand his ground and assert his rights, Lindbergh's government and its programs are too powerful and too dangerous to resist.

Philip is shocked by Herman's transformation—but also by Sandy's less obvious one. Sandy, who was so angry and contemptuous for so long, is more or less back to his old self. Philip wonders what has brought about the change in his brother and if it has anything to do with his own trip to the hospital—or if Sandy is simply masquerading as his old self. Bess, meanwhile, has quit her job at the department store. The "fairy-tale swiftness" with which the Roths' lives have changed astounds Philip—as does the fact that on September 1st, Seldon and his mother are due to move to Danville Kentucky.

The Roths continue to face rapid and unpredictable changes. Philip is alarmed by many of them—but as Sandy returns to normal and Bess returns to her role at home, there is a distanced, "fairy-tale" element to many of these swift shifts.

Philip's trip to the hospital doesn't make the waves in the neighborhood it normally would have—just a few hours after coming off the air on the Sunday night Philip ran away, Walter Winchell was fired for his outrageous fearmongering, accusations against the Lindbergh administration, and attempts to "inflame and frighten his fellow Jews"—the latter quotation is attributed to Lionel Bengelsdorf, who writes an op-ed against Winchell in the *Times*. Winchell writes his own response in the *Mirror*, excoriating those who call him alarmist while allowing fascism to creep into their daily lives. Three days later, Winchell announces his candidacy for president almost 30 months in advance—he is running in the next general election against Lindbergh.

Philip's neighborhood is thoroughly distracted from his antics by the news about Winchell and the fallout of his public war with his detractors. Those in the government—or with ties to the government—believe Winchell is trying to "frighten" people, but Winchell, as a journalist, is aware of just how badly Americans need to be shaken from their complacency. Winchell rightly feels that his premature candidacy is the right way to do just that.

Many people don't take Winchell's candidacy seriously, seeing his campaign as a way of gauging support for Roosevelt while stirring up and measuring anti-Lindbergh sentiment in the public. Winchell's Jewishness—and his reputation as a philanderer—make his candidacy suspect to people on both sides of the aisle. But in Philip's neighborhood, Winchell's candidacy is taken very seriously among his parents' Jewish friends and neighbors. Even young Philip believes that a Jewish person could never be president—and yet for just a few days, he watches his parents and their friends imagine themselves and their children to be "native-born citizens of Paradise."

This passage is significant because it shows that even Philip, at his young age, is aware of how unlikely it is that Americans would ever elect a Jew to the presidency. This demonstrates the ways in which in spite of their participation in American society, Jews are raised to know that certain things are off-limits to them simply because of who they are. However, Philip's parents and neighbors try to push aside this sad truth for just a night or two, imagining a world in which a Jewish president ascends to make them all proud—a "Paradise" in which Jewish people have the same opportunities in practice (not just in name) as all Americans.

In June, Bengelsdorf and Aunt Evelyn are married—the Roths are not invited. Bess is miserable to miss the ceremony, but Herman tries to calm her down. Bess insists all she can think about is what her deceased mother would think—not just about Evelyn's marriage, but about the terribleness that has subsumed the world and the even more terrible things still to come. The wedding is a grand event attended by many Newark and New York City notables. Many high-ranking clergymen from many different religions and denominations attend, as well as presidents of banks, insurance companies, telephone companies, newspaper editors, and more. Notably missing from the attendees is Rabbi Joachim Prinz of Congregation B'nai Abraham, yet another prominent rabbi who has long opposed Lindbergh.

As Bengelsdorf and Evelyn celebrate their marriage, the guest list is extensive and glamorous—yet while the newlyweds host powerful people from the upper echelons of society (most of whom are goyim, *or Gentiles,) their own families and fellow Jews are absent from the festivities. This demonstrates that Evelyn and Bengelsdorf would rather stand in solidarity with the rich and powerful—who probably harbor anti-Semitic beliefs—than with their own community.*

Anne Morrow Lindbergh herself sends a telegram which is read aloud at the reception. The telegram graciously and floridly congratulates the couple on their marriage—and carefully states that the great work the two of them are doing for the OAA is helping Americans to live together in harmony.

Once again, Roth shows how receiving the well wishes of the rich, powerful, and famous—even those who harbor anti-Semitic beliefs or associate with anti-Semites—is more important to Evelyn and Bengelsdorf than the support of their own community.

McCorkle, the FBI agent who questioned the Roths long ago, shows up in their orbit once again. He begins hanging around the market and the diner where the workers eat at the end of their shift, asking about Herman's suspicious behavior: harboring a "traitor" and quitting MetLife to avoid Homestead 42. One of Longy Zwillman's henchmen, Niggy Apfelbaum, brings Monty the news about the FBI agent's concerns. Monty begs Niggy to let Herman keep his job at the market. The next day, Longy himself shows up and gives Monty just 24 hours to fix things. That night, at the end of his shift, Monty himself goes to the diner to confront the FBI agent and pay him off. The agent accepts the bribe. Monty tells Herman that Herman must repay Monty the bribe money out of his own paycheck over the next six months.

This passage shows how the government and its agencies continue harboring resentment and anti-Semitic prejudice against ordinary, hardworking Americans like Herman. Herman winds up paying dearly and heavily for having done nothing at all other than help his family in any way he can.

Over the summer, Bess keeps a closer eye than usual on Sandy and Philip, insisting they check in at home twice a day and refrain from going out after dark—or traveling beyond the school playing field a block away at all. Sandy begins hanging out with tons of girls his age while Philip and Seldon, attached at the hip much to Philip's chagrin, look on in awe. Sandy often takes the girls off, one by one, to do mysterious things with them—Sandy's summer is full of rebellion while Philip's summer is only full of Seldon.

Sandy is older than Philip and continues outpacing him in terms of rebelliousness as they grow up. Philip is glad that his brother seems to be back to his normal self—but he's sad that Sandy has abandoned him to play with Seldon all summer.

All of Herman's work friends and their family have been spread out across the country, and there is no big MetLife picnic at the end of the summer as there usually is. On the sad day when the Roths bid goodbye to the last of the local MetLife families, Herman takes everybody out for ice cream. Bess cries silently as Philip and Sandy eat their sundaes. Suddenly, she exclaims that Lindbergh is teaching them a lesson about what it means to be a Jewish American—their family, and others like them, have been thinking of themselves as Americans when really, all along, they've been otherwise. Herman angrily insists that Lindbergh, though he puts on a front of being all-American, is the one who's truly un-American.

In this passage, the tensions that have been simmering beneath the surface of the Roth family's lives all summer boil over. The sadness of watching their friends and neighbors depart leaves Bess and Herman feeling angry, helpless, and, above all, terrified. Bess, whose fears about the fate of American Jews have long made her family see her as "paranoid," now feels vindicated—she has known all along that the goyim will never truly see Jewish people as Americans.

On the day Seldon and Mrs. Wishnow leave, Philip is shocked by his sadness and pain as they go. He cannot stop crying as he remembers a day when he was six years old and got stuck in the Wishnows' bathroom. He recalls the long ordeal as Mrs. Wishnow tried to talk an increasingly panicked Philip calmly through investigating all the different ways to get out of the bathroom—through a window, by jiggling the lock—only for them all to eventually realize, as Seldon pushed against the door, that the bathroom had been unlocked the whole time. As the embarrassed Philip cried, Mrs. Wishnow comforted him by insisting that such things happen to everyone.

For years now, Philip has longed to be rid of Seldon and, to a smaller extent, of Mrs. Wishnow and the reminder of her husband's death that she represent. But now, as they leave, Philip finds himself overwhelmed with nostalgia and full of regret for the part he has played in sending the Wishnows away.

Walter Winchell begins his campaign in earnest on the Tuesday after Labor Day, hoping to tilt the congressional elections toward the left. He excoriates those who accused him of using his radio broadcast to scream "Fire!" in a crowded theater—he insists that he was simply calling "Fascism!" and will do so to his last breath, so great is his love for America. He campaigns throughout Manhattan and, over the course of the week, in all five boroughs of the city before heading to Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts. In Boston, a pro-Lindbergh mob brandishing burning crosses infiltrates Winchell's small soapbox rally—Winchell has at last brought "Lindbergh grotesquery" to the surface. The Boston police do nothing to restrain the rioters, even as guns go off and Winchell is driven to a nearby hospital with minor burns.

Winchell's campaign reveals—as he knew it would, and as he planned for it to—the "grotesquery" of anti-Semitism waiting to explode in America. The Roths encountering prejudice in a diner in Washington, D.C. was one thing—but as riots break out at Winchell's stop in Boston, it becomes clear to Jewish people everywhere that anti-Semites are no longer interested in furtiveness or secretiveness. Their hatred of Jews is out in the open now—and Winchell has indeed unleashed a kind of "fire."

After Boston, anti-Semitic rioters and agitators attend Winchell's every Massachusetts rally—even as a conservative Massachusetts governor offers Winchell protection from the National Guard. The worst of the violence occurs when Winchell's campaign moves on to Michigan—in Detroit, which is home to many prominent anti-Semites such as the "Radio Priest" Father Charles E. Coughlin and Henry Ford, rioters attack and loot Jewish businesses, beat Jews in the street, and even firebomb several predominantly Jewish schools. By nightfall, many of Detroit's 30,000 Jews have fled to Ontario—America's first large-scale pogrom, comparable to Germany's Kristallnacht, is complete.

As anti-Semitic violence continues to spread across America, the riots gain in intensity, scope, and cruelty. Likening the incidents to the Kristallnacht *suggests that the violence against American Jews is now on-par with the kinds of violence seen in Nazi Germany, the epicenter of the Holocaust. Winchell's audacious campaign has finally exposed the anti-Semitism that was brewing in America long before Lindbergh's presidency.*

The week after the assault on Detroit's Jewish communities, similar violence breaks out in Jewish neighborhoods across the Midwest. All of these pogroms are excused and justified by the public and the media alike as a reaction to Winchell's demagoguery and fearmongering. Arguments about what is happening across the country—and whether any of it is indeed Winchell's fault—soon arrive in Philip's own neighborhood, and children and adults alike debate whether Winchell, in exposing anti-Semitism, is doing the country good or harm.

There is no doubt that Winchell's candidacy and his relentless, unapologetic indictments of Lindbergh's anti-Semitic administration have inspired violence against Jews across America—but whether this is a much-needed reckoning or a dangerous, uncontrollable wildfire is yet to be seen. To many of Lindbergh's anti-Semitic supporters, Winchell's provocations are being met with just rewards.

Rabbi Joachim Prinz establishes the Newark Committee of Concerned Jewish Citizens, which meets with the mayor, the police and fire departments, and even the state legislature. Rabbi Bengelsdorf refuses to join the committee or participate in any of their meetings at the local, state, or federal level. Bengelsdorf and his supporters decry that innocent Jews everywhere are now casualties of the renegade Winchell's desire for power and attention.

As Rabbi Bengelsdorf sides with Lindbergh's administration rather than his own Jewish community, it becomes clearer than ever that his allegiances—no matter what they are motivated by, be it money, power, or blackmail—are with Lindbergh rather than with Jewish people.

Longy Zwillman and his associates Bullet and Niggy Apfelbaum begin recruiting young Jewish teens to a volunteer corps of Provisional Jewish Police. The hoodlums and budding gangsters of the neighborhood are now stationed on every street corner—they who once represented everything Philip's parents detested are now the protectors of the neighborhood.

The gangsters of the neighborhood, young Jewish thugs who worked as enforcers for Longy or associates of the Apfelbaums, are now the only thing standing between the Jews of Newark and the threat of anti-Semitic violence.

On Monday, October 5th of 1942, Philip is home alone listening to the World Series on the radio when the program is interrupted by a news bulletin: Winchell has been shot and killed at an open-air rally in Louisville, Kentucky. As the game broadcast returns, Philip hears the sounds of shouts in the streets—he is not sure whether people are screaming about Winchell or the game. Soon, however, as the Jewish police begin going door-to-door spreading the news, the neighborhood descends into fear. By nightfall, every family is barricaded within their homes. Radios drone and phones ring as the families of Philip's neighborhood call one another to discuss each new development in the story of Winchell's assassination.

Winchell's assassination—even more so than the riots that have been erupting across the country—strikes immediate fear into the hearts of Philip's family and neighbors. Winchell was one of the few prominent Jewish voices willing to publicly oppose Lindbergh. Without him, the Jewish community may find themselves without an advocate and thus more vulnerable than ever before.

Bess, panicked, has Philip bring out his large folding map of North America. He opens it up, and Bess begins searching for the tiny town of Danville. Bess calls a local operator in the county and makes a long-distance call—still an amazing feat at that time—to the Wishnows. It is Seldon who answers the phone—he states that his mother is not home from work yet and that he is eating Fig Newtons while he waits for her. Seldon is amazed by the long-distance technology. He can barely focus on the conversation or the important questions Bess is asking him about his wellbeing or his mother's whereabouts. Bess hands the phone to Philip and instructs him to find out what Seldon knows about what happened in Louisville. When Philip asks Seldon what he knows, Seldon is oblivious. He begins talking about chess.

Bess is deeply concerned for Seldon—it seems impossibly ironic (not to mention frightening) that Louisville, just a few miles from Danville, has become the epicenter of anti-Semitic violence in America. When she tries to check in on the Wishnows, the fact that Mrs. Wishnow isn't home is ominous—but Seldon is oblivious and unable to provide Bess with any information that would give her peace of mind.

Philip asks Seldon if he knows that Walter Winchell is dead. Seldon asks if Walter Winchell is Philip's uncle. At that point, Bess takes the phone back. She orders Seldon to focus and write down what she tells him—the call is costing a lot of money. She tells Seldon to write down that Mrs. Roth called from Newark to make sure everything is okay. Seldon asks if he should be worried about something. Bess tells him that everything is fine. She tries to hang up, but Seldon continues talking, complaining about how much he misses Philip and how few friends he has in school. Bess tells him that things are hard for everyone before hanging up and beginning to sob.

Bess's conversation with Seldon emotionally overwhelms her. Seldon's obliviousness somehow makes the conversation even worse—poor Seldon, isolated from any kind of Jewish community, has no idea what is going on and no sense of the loss that his neighbors back in Newark are reckoning with. The OAA's successful goal of breaking up Jewish communities comes to light here.

Just days before Winchell's death, Philip writes, the homes of empty "homesteaders of 1942" were filled with Italian families under the edicts of the Good Neighbor Project—an OAA program designed to flood Jewish neighborhoods with non-Jewish residents and "enrich the Americanness" of all involved. The program is, of course, truly aimed at weakening Jewish constituencies in major American cities. The family that moves into the Wishnows' old apartment is the Cucuzzas, a large Italian family headed by a stoic but kind night watchman named Tommy, whom the Roths call Mr. Cucuzza. The Cucuzzas have a young son, Joey, who is just a bit older than Philip and is hard of hearing.

The Roths like their new neighbors—but the concept of the Good Neighbors Project in and of itself riles them up, as the OAA's transparent disdain for minority and immigrant communities more apparent than ever. The OAA, in embarking on the Good Neighbor Project, doesn't anticipate that rather than created isolated communities within isolated communities, it will actually bring families together in solidarity.

The night of Winchell's assassination, Mr. Cucuzza and Joey knock on the door of the Roths' apartment and bring in some gifts—a cake and a pistol. Herman tries to give the pistol back, explaining that he doesn't want to believe that as an upstanding American who loves his country, he will have to use it. Mr. Cucuzza states that he loves America, too—Hitler and Mussolini make him sick.

Though Mr. Cucuzza's gesture is a kind and even brave one, Herman rails against the idea that as an American living in America he should be afraid enough of other Americans to need a gun. Herman refuses to see that Bess is right—to hateful and violent anti-Semites, Jews can never be true Americans.

Herman continues talking about his love of America—particularly of Election Day. He remembers every candidate he has ever voted for—and rues the day that America elected an openly fascist president. He tells Cucuzza he's grateful for the pistol—but that in 1942, a neighbor should not have to bring him a gun to help him protect his family from a mob of anti-Semites.

Herman takes his identity as an American seriously—just as seriously as he takes his identity as a Jew. He does not want to place either first, and he's indignant at the prospect of being forced to admit that in the eyes of others, his American identity takes a backseat to his Jewishness.

Herman's speech is interrupted by a new radio bulletin which reports that the body of Walter Winchell will be carried overnight to New York City. By order of Mayor Fiorello La Guardia, it will lie in state in the great hall at Penn Station throughout the morning until the funeral that afternoon at Temple Emanu-El. Among the speakers at Winchell's funeral, the bulletin reports, will be La Guardia and FDR himself. Herman cheers and throws his arms around Philip and Sandy. He declares that tonight is "the beginning of the end of fascism in America."

As always, Herman relies heavily on the figureheads of American democracy and progressivism whom he has long idolized. Herman believes that he and his neighbors can do nothing to stop the threats against them—yet the powerful leaders of the Democratic and progressive establishments can stand up to the isolationist, fascistic bullies who have subsumed the government.

CHAPTER 8: BAD DAYS

The night after Winchell's assassination, Alvin appears at the Roths' driving a fancy new car and with a fiancé named Minna Schapp in tow. Minna—who is eight years Alvin's senior—is the daughter of a Jewish former pinballer and gangster who has reformed himself into a successful gaming-machine entrepreneu and now wants to help establish Alvin as a respectable restaurateur rather than a two-bit hoodlum. Alvin tells the Roths that when Minna's father gave him the money to buy Minna's engagement ring, he told him: "Minna takes care of your **leg**, you take care of Minna, and I take care of you."

Though time has passed and Alvin has made a life for himself elsewhere, this passage makes it clear that he still needs to be cared for physically and financially. Alvin's life is cushy and lucrative, but he has arrived at a comfortable place through the low-life methods of Shushy and his gang as well as the dotage of his new father-in-law. Rather than stay in his community and espouse the same simple, hard-working values as his family, Alvin has pursued a different path.

Over dinner, Alvin tells the Roths all about his new life, employing an extensive and, to Philip, highly impressive lexicon of slang. Everyone else remains mostly silent. Minna is shy, while the Roths are distracted by the news of ongoing synagogue bombings and lootings of Jewish businesses throughout the Midwest. Alvin doesn't mention one word about Winchell's assassination or anything that has happened in its aftermath.

Even as Alvin talks endlessly to his family, he mentions nothing relating to any of their present concerns. He seems entirely disconnected not just from a Jewish community, but from consciousness surrounding Jewish life and Jewish consciousness.

Though Alvin called earlier to ask Bess for permission to come to dinner and thank her and Herman for all they'd done for him over the years and "make peace," it is, Philip notes, hardly an ideal time for such a visit, given the tensions exploding all over the country. It is the night of Winchell's funeral, and the entire neighborhood is on pins and needles, anticipating violent outbreaks in New York and New Jersey in spite of the increased police presence in the Newark streets.

Alvin's attempt to make peace comes in a time of all-out "war" against Jews in America. This is perhaps the novel's most profound externalization of the idea as family as a place of both peace and war, at alternating times and often in ironic or confusing ways.

Though the night starts out amicably, things soon dissolve into havoc—the ordinarily gentle and nonconfrontational Herman exhibits "explosive strength" as he and Alvin clash horribly, beating each other bloody in the very middle of the dining room. Philip cannot help but think about the unprecedented fight in the context of the violence and mayhem that has seized the country in the last few days. Though the home should be a place to feel secure against the chaos happening in the outside world, the Roth household quickly dissolves into violence. Mr. Cucuzza, hearing the noise and fearing the worst, breaks into the living room wielding his pistol. Minna throws up, Philip urinates in his pants, and Herman tries his best to explain what is going on.

Here, Roth presents the fight that breaks out between Herman and Alvin out of context in order to illustrate the often-senseless nature of violence, resentment, and "war" within families. Especially in such a chaotic time, the Roths should be turning to one another for peace, solidarity, and comfort—instead, old tensions rise to the surface and old wounds bleed fresh.

Alvin's **prosthesis** is cracked in two and his stump is badly mutilated by the time the fight is over. Herman has three shattered teeth, two broken ribs, and a gash on his cheek in need of stitches. The glass-topped coffee table is shattered, shards of it embedded in both Herman and Alvin's palms. The whole fight, Philip says, was the result of Herman confronting Alvin about his indifference to the suffering of American Jews just because of his hopeful financial prospects. Alvin, in retaliation, began screaming about how he'd lost his leg and ruined his life "for the Jews." As he pulled up his pant leg to remind Herman of his prosthesis, Alvin spit in Herman's face—and then the fight broke out.

Alvin, fed up with his family's inability to recognize all he has given for the Jews of Europe, is pushed past the edge of reason when Herman accuses him of being indifferent to the suffering of American Jews. As the fight breaks out, Herman and Alvin notably shatter a glass coffee table, mirroring the violence of Kristallnacht *(in which windows were shattered en masse) and the similar pogroms and riots now breaking out all across America. Roth suggests that when Jewish people police one another's Jewishness or allegiance to other members of their community, there will be only violence and hatred between them.*

Late that night, after Mr. Cucuzza brings Herman back home from the emergency room, shots, screams, and sirens break out on a nearby street—the Cucuzzas hurry the Roths from their apartment to shelter them, fearing the pogroms have begun. The firing goes on for an hour, but the Roths don't return home until dawn. In the morning, they learn that the firing was between the city police and the Jewish police—three Jews have been killed, but more on the basis of their being neighborhood thugs than on the basis of their Jewishness. Bullet Apfelbaum is among the dead—according to the Newark police, Bullet and his patrolmen are rumored to have fired the first shots after a verbal dispute.

Luckily, the violence that breaks out on the streets of Newark on the night of Winchell's funeral is not as bad as it could have been—but it still serves as a reminder to the Roths that life as they know it has been profoundly disrupted and many not go back to normal anytime soon.

In the morning, Herman calls Shepsie Tirschwell long-distance to tell his friend how rapidly things in Newark have deteriorated. He admits that he has been wrong all along—he wants to talk to Shepsie about emigration to Canada. As Philip and Sandy head from home for school, the exhausted Philip weeps the whole way—he feels that soon, his hometown will have no significance beyond being the place where he was born. However, over the week that follows, the Roths and their neighbors are shocked when suddenly the nightmare ends—Lindbergh disappears, and Jews are once again safe. The narration breaks starkly as Philip, using materials drawn from the archives of Newark's Newsreel Theater, explains from a detached perspective the extraordinary events of October 6th through October 16th of 1942.

Just as it seems that the Roths will have to abandon their home, their faith in America, and their hard-won Jewish community in Newark, everything changes. Roth uses a stark, decisive narrative break in order to more accurately and easily relay the "historical timeline" behind the exceptional events of his version of October 1942.

On Tuesday, October 6th, 30,000 mourners pass through Penn Station to pay their respects to Walter Winchell. A minute of silence is observed throughout the city and the NYPD monitors the streets as the funeral procession makes its way to Temple Emanu-El. Dignitaries fill the seats of the temple as Mayor Fiorello La Guardia, who was himself born to a Jewish mother, delivers a eulogy in which he notes that though Winchell was a flawed man, his detractors in the Republican vanguard blithely ignore the fascist sympathies of their own figurehead. Out in the streets, those listening on loudspeakers begin chanting "Where is *Lind*-bergh?" over and over. FDR takes the pulpit and shocks the mourners gathered—and the nation watching—as he throws his support behind La Guardia as a "national unity" candidate opposing Lindbergh's second term.

As Winchell's funeral gets under way, it becomes clear that Herman's predictions about the end of fascism in America are more than just a faint glimmer of hope—there seems to be real movement on the other side of the aisle to drive out the Lindbergh administration and its fascist politics. Lindbergh's silence on Winchell's death—not to mention his absence from the man's funeral, given the presence of so many other dignitaries—is profoundly noticeable.

On Wednesday, October 7th, Lindbergh takes off from Long Island in the *Spirit of St. Louis* and heads for Louisville. When he lands, a mechanic immediately begins inspecting the plane and equipping it for the return flight. Nearly a third of Louisville's 320,000 residents turn out at the airfield to listen to the president's address—which makes no mention of Walter Winchell, his assassination, or his funeral. Instead, Lindbergh simply says he wants to remind the country that America is "at peace" and that he is returning soon to Washington to make sure it stays that way. Lindbergh returns to his plane, takes off, and rises into the air—but his plane disappears between Louisville and Washington, "never to be seen again."

Lindbergh's final address is delivered with an almost delusional level of ignorance and a palpable sense of desperation. Lindbergh refuses to acknowledge the violence and chaos his policies have inspired, focusing only on his antiwar stance in a blatant, transparent bid for the universal adoration his platform once brought him.

On Thursday, October 8th, ground searches of Lindbergh's ostensible flight path yield no evidence of any wreckage. The Army, the Coast Guard, the Navy, and the National Guard join the search—but that evening, it seems more obvious than ever that Lindbergh's plane has simply vanished. Burton K. Wheeler, Lindbergh's controversial Vice President, assumes the duties of acting president. Headlines across America read: "WHERE IS LINDBERGH?"

The "WHERE IS LINDBERGH?" headlines mirror the chants deployed at Winchell's funeral. Lindbergh has abandoned America—leaving the constituencies that love him and desire his guidance, along with the ones who hate him and want him to answer for his injustices, completely in the lurch.

On Friday, October 9th, Americans across the country awake to find that martial law has been imposed under Acting President Wheeler—rumor has it that Lindbergh has been kidnapped and is being held hostage somewhere in North America by "parties unknown." Wheeler assures Congress that he is working toward the president's release. The nation seals its borders and shuts down airports and seaports. Newspapers across the country print the headline "AGAIN!" accompanied by a picture of Charles and Anne Morrow Lindbergh's two-year-old son, Charles Jr., who went missing in 1932.

Here, Wheeler takes advantage of Americans' general confusion and panic to create even more isolation and uncertainty—and to consolidate power for himself. The media fuels the fire, resurrecting the "Case of the Century" as they speculate on Lindbergh's disappearance.

On Saturday, October 10th, German state radio announces that Lindbergh's disappearance has been perpetrated by a conspiracy of "Jewish interests," orchestrated by FDR in collusion Jewish members of the government—including the half-Jewish La Guardia—in order to launch a Jewish war against the rest of the world. The Germans suggest this unseen cabal also murdered Winchell, planted a rogue mechanic at the Kentucky airfield who worked to silence Lindbergh's radio, and are now holding him in captivity in Canada. Acting President Wheeler, ignoring common sense, examines this German intel carefully with the help of several White House aides. When Bengelsdorf is seen arriving at the White House in the early evening, however, it becomes widely understood that Anne Morrow Lindbergh does not believe "Jewish interests" have anything to do with the president's disappearance.

As Nazi Germany attempts to pin Lindbergh's disappearance on American Jews—fueling their own agenda while sowing seeds of suspicion, discontent, and indeed violence in the United States—Lindbergh's successor, Wheeler, does little to delegitimize these chaotic, untrue, and irresponsible assertions. Only Bengelsdorf's acceptance at the White House demonstrates that the First Lady herself does not believe in the conspiracy. America is in a terrifying position, poised seemingly on the brink of chaos—rather than standing together in solidarity, the government allows foreign influences to alienate Americans from one another.

On Sunday, October 11th, after a national day of prayer, Acting President Wheeler addresses the nation via radio to assure his fellow Americans that he has not abandoned the search for Lindbergh, and that Canada has joined the search as well. Rabbi Bengelsdorf addresses reporters outside the White House that same evening and tells them that Anne Morrow Lindbergh is unconvinced that a kidnapping is behind her husband's disappearance. The media begins to report that the First Lady has become the captive of "Rabbi Rasputin," comparing Bengelsdorf to the Siberian monk who insinuated himself into the imperial palace in Russia, taking control of the royal family in the days before the Russian Revolution.

This passage shows how in spite of his "safe" position as a personal adviser to the President and the First Lady, Bengelsdorf is not exempt from harmful anti-Semitic rhetoric and conspiracy theories. Bengelsdorf has tried to secure status and protection for himself even as he's pushed isolationist, anti-Semitic agendas—now, he finds that he is still not legitimate in the eyes of the overwhelmingly Gentile American population.

On Monday, October 12th, the London media reports that British intelligence has obtained coded German communications which prove that Lindbergh is alive and well in Berlin. According to the intel, Lindbergh has, in accordance with a prearranged agreement with Göring, ditched the *St. Louis* in the Atlantic, hopped aboard a German U-boat, and flown to German to meet with Hitler. La Guardia issues a statement condemning Lindbergh's treason. Though martial law is still in place, anti-Semitic riots break out across the nation at sundown. By the next morning, 122 Americans have died.

Lindbergh's alleged treason—and the government's condemnation of it—should ideally make the American people come to their senses. Instead, Jewish people continue to suffer at the hands of anti-Semites and conspiracy theorists. Americans, it seems, have forgotten how to stand in solidarity with one another.

On Tuesday, October 13th, Wheeler addresses the nation and blames the riots on the British government and its American supporters. He decries and discredits the intel on Lindbergh and reports that order has been restored to America after one terrible night. Bengelsdorf delivers his own address, reading a statement from the First Lady in which she discourages her fellow Americans to ignore unproven claims about her husband's disappearance. The First Lady declines to speak directly with any reporters. Government officials call for the arrest of "Rabbi Rasputin."

Wheeler sides with the Germans rather than the British, demonstrating that he is continuing Lindbergh's allegiances in his stead, even in the face of credible intelligence about Lindbergh's treason. When Bengelsdorf releases a much more calm statement on behalf of the First Lady, the press attacks him using violent, anti-Semitic rhetoric.

On Wednesday, October 14th, a *Chicago Tribune* article reports that President Lindbergh has been reunited with his missing son, Charles Jr., in Berlin. According to the article, Charles Jr. is now 12 years old and has been imprisoned in a Jewish ghetto in Krakow, where his blood has been drawn and used in the preparation of Passover matzohs for years. Meanwhile, House Republicans call for war against Canada. Law enforcement agencies across the country blame the "so-called anti-Semitic riots" of October 12th on local branches of a larger, more far-reaching Jewish conspiracy. La Guardia condemns the "hysteria, ignorance, malice, stupidity, hatred, and fear" that has seized the nation. La Guardia suggests that Hitler is leading a campaign of misinformation aimed at American Jews.

Even as La Guardia's assertion that a campaign of misinformation and anti-Semitism has overtaken the American news media, outlets continue to report terrible, factually inaccurate stories about Jews while the government refuses to recognize anti-Semitism in action on the ground. America refuses to stand in solidarity with its Jewish citizens, instead actively blaming Jews for the chaos that has overtaken the nation.

On Thursday, October 15th, Rabbi Bengelsdorf is taken into FBI custody under suspicion of being "among the ringleaders of the Jewish conspiratorial plot against America." The First Lady is taken to the hospital. Several other Jewish or leftist government members, labor leaders, economists, and journalists are arrested. Anti-FBI protests and demonstrations break out in America's major cities even as the Republicans praise the FBI's swift action in "thwarting the conspirators' plot." All radio stations and newspapers in New York are shut down, as are all bridges and tunnels into the cities. Rumors of a surprise Canadian attack swirl over the airwaves. Reports from London warn of an imminent German invasion of Mexico.

As Wheeler takes action to suppress the titular "plot against America," it becomes clear that what he's actually attempting is a cowardly coup. As the media reports conflicting and unverified things, the U.S. government adds to the chaos by aiming anti-Semitic arrests at several high-ranking government and public officials, tacitly endorsing Berlin's purposefully misleading propaganda.

On Friday, October 16th, Anne Morrow Lindbergh addresses the nation—she says that she was kidnapped, placed in a mental ward, and straitjacketed and held prisoner, but that she's now free. She begs for the disarmament of the National Guard, for the FBI to release those arrested, and for Congress to remove Wheeler from office and appoint the secretary of state to the presidency. Wheeler, she says, was in charge of her abduction. Two and a half weeks later, after the First Lady dismantles Wheeler's government, FDR is be elected to a third presidential term. The next month, after Japan attacks Pearl Harbor, America officially enters World War Ii. FDR pardons Burton Wheeler. President Lindbergh is never found or heard from again.

This rapid-fire reversal of the chaotic developments that have taken hold of the country in recent days effectively put America back on its "real" timeline. This passage is significant, then, because it calls into question the idea of historical fact versus emotional truth. While the U.S. government did not actually fall to an authoritarian leader and while Jewish government officials were not actually arrested on conspiracy charges, Roth suggests that the chaos and uncertainty of the time could have easily lent itself to such a scenario.

The most unbelievable (but not least convincing) story Philip hears about the truth of Lindbergh's disappearance comes from Aunt Evelyn in the days following Bengelsdorf's arrest—the story, she says, is straight from the First Lady. According to Bengelsdorf, the Nazis were behind the 1932 kidnapping of Charles Jr. They smuggled him out of America, planted a fake corpse, and told the Lindberghs of the child's healthy, safe arrival in Berlin. He would be kept alive, the Nazis told the couple, as long as they complied with orders from Berlin. Lindbergh's entire presidency, then, was engineered by Hitler himself—Lindbergh was a tool in a larger plot against America, complying with whatever the Nazis ordered him to do in exchange for rare and brief meetings every few years with his son.

Aunt Evelyn's story is sensational—but not impossible. As Roth examines the possibility that Lindbergh's presidency was actually illegitimate, engineered by the Nazis in pursuit of enacting the Third Reich's agenda in America, it could be that the threat to Jews was always as serious as Winchell, Bess, and others warned.

Every speech, every political stratagem, and even every outfit Lindbergh wore was handpicked by the Nazis in service of their "grand imperial design." The Nazis began applying pressure on Lindbergh to institute measures against American Jews—only then, according to Bengelsdorf, did Lindbergh resist, instituting "token programs" like Just Folks and Homestead 42 to appease the Nazis. Von Ribbentrop's state dinner was part of a meeting meant to formulate more anti-Jewish measures—and again, Lindbergh's child was used as blackmail as the Nazis pressured him to take steps that would bring America closer to its own "final solution."

Bengelsdorf's account is salacious, but again, it explains many of the patently unbelievable concessions that Lindbergh made to the Nazis throughout his presidency as well as the rapid escalation of transparently anti-Semitic legislation and initiatives. It does not entirely explain Bengelsdorf's allegiance to Lindbergh—that, unfortunately, still seems to be due to a combination of personal greed and charismatic leadership.

The Nazis quickly dubbed Lindbergh a coward and a "dinner-party anti-Semite." Frustrated with his failure to comply with their vision, the Nazis disappeared Lindbergh and appointed Wheeler, who was more sympathetic to their cause, to the presidency. The Nazis, following Lindbergh's capture, attempted to force the First Lady to do their bidding, warning her that if she did anything other than vacate the White House in silence, her son Charles Jr. would be sent to fight on the front lines in Stalingrad.

Bengelsdorf's report on the extent of the Nazis' influence over not just Lindbergh, but several members of his administration, is staggering. His story calls into question the legitimacy not just of Lindbergh's presidency, but of the tenure of many government officials (and behind-the-scenes attendants like Bengelsdorf, who aided and abetted the rise of fascism in America).

Hours after Bengelsdorf's arrest, Evelyn arrives at the house and conveys the above story to Bess and Philip. Just after the war, Bengelsdorf publishes it as a tell-all—*My Life Under Lindbergh*. Philip wonders if Anne Morrow Lindbergh's radio speech—and her call for the end of Wheeler's presidency—meant that her son Charles Jr. came to harm (or whether the child the Nazis presented to the Lindberghs as Charles Jr. was even their own son). These questions and more, the older Philip writes, are still controversial.

As the older Philip interjects himself into the narrative, he reveals that in "his" timeline, the truth about Lindbergh's disappearance (and about his entire presidency) is still unknown and hotly contested. This suggests that while Americans have ostensibly healed from the turmoil of WWII—and all that led up to it—there are still divisions in the sense of collective experience and solidarity that Americans do or do not share.

CHAPTER 9: PERPETUAL FEAR

The narrative returns to the evening of Monday, October 12th, 1942—the day of the riots that have broken out across the country following the British intelligence report about Lindbergh fleeing to Germany. It is clear to the Roths, given the closed Canadian border, that they have made a "grave mistake" in failing to leave in time—things in the house are tense. Fear is everywhere and, especially in the Roth household (given Bengelsdorf's rise to prominence in the news), life has taken on a strange, eerie feeling. The phone rings at 10 o'clock at night—it is Seldon Wishnow on the other end, sobbing. He declares that his mother is not home from work in Louisville and that he hasn't eaten dinner.

As riots and violence rage outside, the Roths find themselves contending with the personal consequences of the violence unfolding around them in the form of Bengelsdorf's arrest—and a call from Seldon, who is at the epicenter of the violence in the Midwest and is once again home alone, isolated, and cut off from what's going on.

Seldon weeps to Bess, telling her that his mother must be dead—if she were alive, she would have called. Bess tries to calm Seldon by telling him he's being hysterical. She assures him something ordinary must have come up. Seldon, however, insists he has been orphaned. Philip reveals that Seldon would later turn out to be right—Mrs. Wishnow has been killed in the Louisville riots, though no one will know until her remains are found in the smoldering husk of her car the following day.

As Philip interjects to state that Seldon's mother is, as he fears, dead, the moments that follow take on the weight of history. The violence in the middle of the country is not so isolated from Newark—the things that are happening around the country right now, Roth suggests, will have personal and political reverberations for years to come.

Bess tells Seldon to eat something in order to calm down. She urges Seldon to put the phone down, take a look in the refrigerator, and tell her what's inside. He does so—there is not much to eat. Philip, Sandy, and Herman have gathered in the kitchen—Bess asks Sandy how far the Mawhinneys are from Danville. He tells her they live about 20 minutes away. She tells Sandy to fetch their phone number, and he does. Bess tells Seldon to make himself some toast and cereal and eat breakfast. Seldon is confused because it is nighttime. Bess tells Seldon to eat—she says that if he does so, Philip will call him back in half an hour.

Bess knows there's nothing she can really do for Seldon from so far away, so she focuses on finding practical solutions to his situation that she can help with from a distance. The Roths are concerned and worried for Seldon as if he is one of their own—even Philip, who once hated Seldon and wished him gone, now finds himself plagued with remorse and sadness as he realizes what is happening to his friend.

Bess hangs up and calls the Mawhinneys. She apologizes for calling so late, introduces herself, and explains the situation. She asks if the Mawhinneys will help her with a little boy who's home alone in Danville. The Mawhinneys agree to go to Danville, pick Seldon up, and bring him home. Philip is amazed by his mother's quickness and efficiency in the face of such terror and grief. Even after everything the Roths have been through lately, from fistfights to shootouts, Philip has not stopped to consider the toll that Lindbergh's presidency has taken on their family.

Philip is awed by his mother as he watches her launch into crisis mode. His realization that his family will be forever changed by the things that are happening to them now is stark and unsettling—history seems to be unfolding all around them.

Bess calls Seldon back and instructs him to pack up his toothbrush, pajamas, and a change of clothes, dress himself warmly, and wait for the Mawhinneys to come pick him up. Seldon cries out that his mother must really be dead. Bess assures Seldon that Mrs. Wishnow is fine and will be there to pick him up at the Mawhinneys' the next morning. Bess stays on the phone with Seldon as he makes the necessary preparations, grabs a housekey, and waits for the Mawhinneys. As Seldon rushes out the door at the honk of the truck, he forgets to hang up the phone, but it doesn't matter—Seldon is never to set foot in the Danville house again.

All of these preparations take on a tragic tinge once Philip informs his readers that Mrs. Wishnow is dead—Seldon's worst nightmare has come true, and he is now an orphan. Mrs. Wishnow's death at the hands of anti-Semitic violence signals that the government knew exactly what it was doing in sending Jews to the middle of the country: isolating them and placing them in danger of violence.

All Philip can think of that night—and in the days to follow, as Herman and Sandy drive out to Kentucky to scoop up Seldon and bring him home to live with them—is that he is responsible for Mrs. Wishnow's death and Seldon's troubles.

Philip feels guilty about his role in the Wishnows' departure. He believes that he betrayed them—and while this is true to some extent, the bad end they've come to is not his fault or something he could have foreseen.

On Thursday, October 15th, after Herman and Sandy have departed for Kentucky, the phone rings—it is Aunt Evelyn, announcing Rabbi Bengelsdorf's arrest. That afternoon, Evelyn shows up at the Roths' house looking and sounding crazed. She has no idea where Lionel is being held, and she insists the FBI is after her, too, because she "know[s] the truth." She begs her sister to hide her. Bess tells Evelyn to go to the von Ribbentrops' instead, turning her away and ordering her to leave. Evelyn turns to Philip and begs him to take pity on her, but Bess slams the door shut in her face. Then, Bess hugs Philip tight and tells him that Evelyn is no longer their concern.

Bess, who has always been patient and relatively gentle with Evelyn, now turns her sister away. Evelyn has gone too far, and now Bess cannot accept her or help her even in Evelyn's greatest moment of need. Bess makes the choice to protect her family rather than shelter, at her own peril, the woman who has betrayed them all.

Bess begins crying—she regrets having let Sandy and Herman go off into Lindbergh's increasingly dangerous America, and she now regrets having turned Evelyn away as well. Philip, young as he is, realizes that one can never do something right without doing something wrong.

Philip feels badly for his mother, who is beating herself up for making understandable errors of judgement in a time of intense, catastrophic upheaval. Bess struggles to be there for her family when she needs them, but she is overwhelmed by the continual turmoil of family life in such difficult times.

That evening, emergency meetings to be presided over by members of the Committee of Concerned Jewish Citizens are called throughout Newark. The police are mobilized throughout the neighborhood for its citizens' protection—last night, in a neighboring town, several Jewish businesses were looted. While Bess goes out to a meeting, Joey Cucuzza comes upstairs to keep Philip company. That evening, as mounted police forces clip-clop up and down the streets, Philip is both comforted and disturbed by the presence of the horses.

As the police take to the streets to stand watch over the Jews of Newark, Philip is both disturbed and oddly comforted. It is clear that he will not be abandoned and that there are friends and neighbors around—but there is something eerie and uneasy about the atmosphere in the streets.

Joey wants Philip to play with his hearing aid. Philip puts it on but worries that he'll go deaf and have to go work at the nearby New Jersey Pretzel Factory where, rumor has it, deaf children are employed as pretzel-benders. Philip says he's not in the mood to play considering everything that's going on outside—but Joey, of course, has no true sense of the weight of what is going on. He continues messing with Philip, dialing the earpiece up and down and distressing Philip with the noises it makes. Philip wishes he could run away again, protected by the horses, and go off to make pretzels away from it all.

This passage shows that even though Philip has a kind of friend in Joey, Joey, as a non-Jew, cannot possibly understand the fears and struggles that Philip is facing right now. In spite of Joey's company, Philip feels more alone than ever.

Joey tells Philip about a Jewish orphan runaway who drank the blood of one of the horses on the orphanage property—Jews, Joey says, all drink blood. Philip insists that Jews don't drink blood, and that saying they do is crazy. Soon after, Joey leaves. Philip locks the door behind him and begins listening to the radio, thinking all the time about running away. At last, he decides to mount yet another escape from home. He plans to adopt a fake identity (and an Irish name), pretend to be deaf, and go to work at the pretzel factory.

This passage shows that in spite of Joey's general playfulness toward Philip—and in spite of his family's support of and solidarity with the Roths—Joey has still been exposed to harmful anti-Semitic rhetoric and has come to internalize much of it. Philip, frustrated and dismayed, wants to leave home more than ever before.

As Philip descends the stairs to the cellar to retrieve his suitcase, he finds himself fearing that the ghost of Mr. Wishnow is downstairs. Aloud, he tells the "ghost" that he is sorry for his part in sending Seldon away. From the darkness, a woman's voice replies that she knows the truth—it is Aunt Evelyn, and as she emerges from the darkness, she begs Philip to hide her from the FBI once more.

Philip can never seem to run away from home. As he attempts this most recent escape, he finds that his trip to the cellar comes at a fortuitous time—he is once again alone with Aunt Evelyn, and this time, it is she who needs shelter from him.

Philip brings Aunt Evelyn upstairs, where he fixes her some milk and bread. Evelyn eats hungrily and then begins telling Philip that the FBI are after her and have called out the mounted police to find her. Philip tells her the mounted police are in the neighborhood due to the anti-Semitic violence, but Evelyn insists that she's the one they want. Philip realize that Evelyn has gone mad—or perhaps she has been for a long time. Evelyn asks for some more bread and a pear, and she asks if Philip will bring her food and water as she hides out down in the cellar.

This passage—and Evelyn's apparent madness in it—casts some doubt on the story of Lindbergh's "plot" with the Nazis. At the same time, it shows how Evelyn, completely disconnected from her family and her roots, has nothing to cling to in a time of turmoil. The isolation she has made for herself drives her mad.

Bess returns home, anxious to hear from Philip whether Herman or Sandy has called to say they've gotten safely to Kentucky. She's upset when Philip has no news for her, and she tells Philip that he won't be going to school tomorrow. Philip asks why, and Bess tell him that there may be a war with Canada. Philip continues pressing his mother for answers, but she has none—all they can do, she says, is sit and wait. Philip heads to bed, consumed by thoughts of war; of what Aunt Evelyn, down in the cellar, will be using as a toilet; and of how his father and brother are faring on their trip out west.

Throughout the entire novel, the young Philip has had to internalize and accept the rapid deterioration of the world as he knows it—in this passage, as Philip confronts the idea of a war with Canada and the dissolution or destruction of his family, he is oddly disconnected from his anxieties. It is almost as if everything has become too much for him to process.

Feeling that the only thing he can control is helping Evelyn, Philip fetches a bedpan from the bathroom to bring into the cellar for her—but his mother confronts him on the stairs. Hearing footsteps and arguing, the Cucuzzas again fear the worst and come running—but soon, everything quiets down, and Bess sends Philip to sleep in her room while she and Evelyn take over the boys' room.

Philip wants to help Evelyn, but there is nothing he can do to help her. Evelyn's fate is left open-ended—but as she and Bess reconcile, spending a night talking through everything in the children's room, it seems as if there is hope for Evelyn's reconciliation with her family and her heritage after all.

Sandy and Herman's 1,500-mile trip out west is the "adventure of Sandy's lifetime." Herman carries Mr. Cucuzza's pistol in the glovebox the whole time, stopping for gas only once and, upon arriving at the Mawhinneys', staying for only five hours before turning right back around. Herman's stitches from his fight with Alvin are infected, and Seldon is sick and feverish in the backseat. The trip back takes three times as long as the trip out because of how frequently Seldon needs to stop to vomit and how often the car breaks down.

Though Herman knows that there are serious troubles that could befall him, Sandy, and Seldon if they encounter the wrong people, Sandy sees the perilous and bizarre adventure out west as a tremendous "adventure." Even amid all the chaos, Sandy views the trip as a way to explore America and have a unique, strange experience—he is disconnected from the omnipresent threat of anti-Semitic violence that Herman feels.

Calling a tow truck—and seeking medical help for Seldon—is fraught business, as Herman and Sandy are terrified that the country folks they encounter on the backroads of West Virginia will realize they are Jewish and harm them. Instead, when they at last find a country clinic, the doctor treats them gently and kindly, giving Seldon fluids and draining the pus from Herman's face. By the time the three of them arrive back in Newark, Herman is ill with pneumonia and must be hospitalized. In spite of it all, Philip knows there is nothing that could have stopped his father from rescuing Seldon—Herman is a "rescuer," particularly of orphans. Without one's parents, Herman knows, one is "rootless" and "vulnerable."

This passage highlights Herman's determination to rescue the orphaned Seldon, just as he was so determined to rescue Alvin and put him on the right path. Herman knows that orphans—especially Jewish orphans—are "rootless" and "vulnerable," and he wants to do everything in his power to make sure the orphans he encounters are given the gifts of community and support.

While Herman is being fixed up by the country doctor in Appalachia, Sandy begins sketching one of the other patients at the clinic—a blonde 13-year-old girl. When Herman comes out of the office and sees what Sandy is doing, he drags him from the clinic and reprimands him, reminding Sandy of the case of Leo Frank. Frank was a Jew who was lynched in Georgia in 1913 after he was suspected of killing a young Gentile worker in his pencil factory named Mary Phagan. His body was displayed as a warning to "Jewish libertines" in the South to stay away from Gentile women. The Frank case, Philip surmises, is only one small part of the long, brutal history which made Herman and Sandy's journey so terrifying—but of course, Philip writes, "it all goes further back than that."

In this passage, Roth shows how Herman tries to impress upon Sandy the generations of anti-Semitic violence and cruelty to which Jews have been subjected in America and abroad. Philip interjects to suggest that the vast magnitude of stories like Leo Frank's are weighted behind every decision Herman has made on behalf of his family, knowing all along just how profound his sons' struggles with anti-Semitism would be throughout their lives.

After returning from Kentucky, Seldon comes to live with the Roths. Sandy moves into the front room and Seldon takes over the bed next to Philip's, the one previously occupied by Alvin and Aunt Evelyn. This time, there is no stump for Philip to care for—Seldon himself is the stump. Until Seldon is taken to live with his aunt in Brooklyn many months later, Philip is Seldon's "**prosthesis**."

As Philip describes his role as Seldon's "prosthesis," he reconfigures the central symbol of Alvin's prosthetic leg and reexamines the cyclical nature of suffering and the insufficiency of caregiving in the face of such unfixable, unchangeable circumstances.

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