

# You're a Jew

By Ken Kalish

"You're a Jew," he said. It was a declaration, not a question. His sentence ended with a lowered inflection, conveying a sense of distaste – perhaps enmity.

He was unremarkable in many ways. Stand him up in a line of random Minnesota men and he wouldn't be unusual. Washed out blonde is common in our polyglot Scandinavian-Russian-German populace. Broad shoulders and big arms are often the result of days spent logging. His green uniform shirt carried a Ford logo, but no name.

Our little sextet had been playing a game of bar Trivia. We were enjoying one another's company, not even finished with our second round of beer and brandy. He, on the other hand, had been sitting at the bar alone drinking serial craft beers. We didn't invite him over, he just marched over and thrust himself upon us.

"You're a Jew," he repeated, a hint of anger in his voice. Rosco, the bartender, looked toward me, wordlessly asking if I needed help. Our interloper pulled over a chair and sat down, uninvited. Elbows on the table and still clutching a bottle of local stout, he leaned forward to fix me with a stare.

"You are, aren't you? A Jew."

Our attempts to ignore him failed against his onslaught. I looked him in the eye, unblinking, and sent a confident smile his way.

"Is it important to you?"

He missed the sarcasm. Whatever it was he expected, my reaction didn't fit in with his expectations. I asked him to help with a Trivia question.

"Which came first, FDR's inauguration or Hitler's assumption of power in Germany?"

"Hitler!" His confidence came through almost as a shout.

"Wrong," said a member of our group. "FDR became President months before Hitler's backers made him legally the head of the German government."

"Another Jew," he spat.

"You sound like you admire Hitler." The statement made him smile proudly.

"Damn right I do!"

Rosco wandered over to unnecessarily wipe imaginary spilled beer from the table next to ours. Two Marine combat veterans of Viet Nam turned their chairs toward us. Friends of mine, they just wanted to watch.

In his element, the interloper began to praise Hitler's leadership and ideals. At one point he pulled out his wallet and lay a worn photograph on the table as though it might be an object of worship.

"That's my Uncle," he proclaimed. The image was of a man in a German uniform, one I had seen in a collection of Bing photographs.

"That, sir, is Heinrich Himmler," I observed dryly. "He's been dead for more than 75 years."

The 40-something man's chest puffed out as he affirmed Himmler's identity and once again proclaimed the monster to be his Uncle. He became louder and more animated as he launched into a speech about the greatness of the NAZI ideal.

As though we had rehearsed it, each member of our little group stood and put on coats. Oblivious, speaking lovingly to his empty beer bottle, the intruder didn't notice.

Outside, we assessed the man who apparently was lost in his own world. "Creep" was one assessment, "drunk" another, and "asshole" the culmination of our considered opinions.

We went our way believing this to be an isolated event brought about by a combination of beer and belief.

It was not an isolated event. He has been back to that small bar several times, each time spouting his peculiar philosophy and clearing patrons from the place. Rosco says that if he should once again intrude, he will be removed and banned. That's a nice gesture, but once in a while I wake from a sound sleep hearing that sentence and inflection again.

"You're a Jew."