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Louis Zamperini¹

- A juvenile delinquent in California.
- An Olympic runner at the Berlin Games of 1936.
- An Air Force bomb aimer, decorated for gallantry in action.
- A survivor of forty-seven days adrift on a life raft.
- An ill-treated prisoner of war of the Japanese for two and a half years.
- A drunkard who almost wrecked his marriage.
- A Christian.

All these statements relate to the extraordinary life of Louis Zamperini.

The story begins when Louis Zamperini's father, Anthony, left Italy to make a new life in America. Louise, his mother, though born in America, was half Italian and half Austrian. They were an honest, hard-working couple, the sort who wanted to pay cash for things or do without. Louis was born in New York in 1917. He had a brother, Pete, who was two years older, and two younger sisters, Virginia and Sylvia.

When Louis was two and Pete was four, they both contracted double pneumonia. After their recovery, the doctor advised a move to a warmer climate. California was mentioned. As a result of the doctor's advice, the family moved west. In 1920 Torrance became home. It was then a small industrial town on the outskirts of Los Angeles.

The everyday language used in the laughter-filled home was Italian. When Louis started school the laughter stopped. The other boys and girls picked on him because of his poor English and Italian accent. Jeering groups of cruel children would provoke him so that he would swear in Italian. Louis' anger and unhappiness exploded in bad behaviour. By the age of seven he was 'that tough little kid down the street'. There was a chip on his shoulder. He smoked, played rough and cursed freely.

In spite of a supportive background, his rebellion grew steadily worse. By the time he was twelve he had a gang of other social misfits to mix with. Stealing became a sport—everything from chocolate bars to car parts. One of his favourite tricks was to steal beer and whisky from bootleggers knowing that they dare not report him. It was the era of 'prohibition', when possession of alcohol was illegal in America. Anybody who crossed him was in danger. Once or twice he was in frenzied fights during which he lost control of himself, beating his enemy in a most bloodthirsty and dangerous way.

As each day passed he grew more touchy and defiant. His worried parents upset him when they asked, 'Why can't you be a

good boy like your brother?' All he could say in reply was that they picked on him, and cared more for Pete. His mother itemized his faults and then broke down in tears.

Louis hated both police and school. The chief of police in Torrance took him round the cells to see men locked up, telling him, 'We are warning you; this is where you will end up if you don't change.'

One summer holiday he ran away for a time with a friend. They jumped onto a freight train and hid in a boxcar. There were drink-sodden tramps on this train going to San Diego. On the way home one of them fell onto the rails when the train lurched round a bend. The tramp was cut to pieces. The hideous sight had no effect on Louis.

Pete was fed up with police coming to the family home about his younger brother. Without Louis' knowledge, his mother and Pete discussed the problem with the school principal. The school had a scheme of punishments already lined up to control the troublesome teenager.

The principal listened to Pete's plan. If Louis were given a clean slate, Pete would try to interest his brother in sport, especially running. As a result, in February 1932, when Louis was fifteen, he started the new school year without having to face a backlog of punishments.

Eventually, Louis Zamperini started to be recognized for his sporting prowess. On one occasion he heard pupils from his school shout, 'Come on, Louie!' This startled him because he was convinced that nobody knew or cared about him. Gaining recognition on the running track began to change his attitude. The direction of his life altered. He started to train and get fit every day of the year, whatever the weather, and gave up smoking while in training. He also applied himself to his studies. Though Pete was a fine runner, he quickly recognized that Louis was better. He paced Louis and encouraged him.