

1941—A Jewish Friend at School

A name that hinted strangeness to those schoolgirls' ears

Name from Old Norse—Helga, holy, blessed.

Helga, your spoken words were hard to understand

In that class girls chose not to

Were jealous of your skill with numbers

Your knowledge of a world unknown to them

I, the only other Jew, embraced you with full heart.

That day we felt the pack around us

Licking lips. Waiting the kill.

You translated *de mortuis nil nisi bonum*

Infusing meaning, bearing pain.

You raised the lid of wooden desk

You bowed your head inside

The schoolgirls laughed. Sarcasm oozed as one girl slid in *sotto voce*

'*Hysteria Hebraica*.

Your cheeks aflame allowed the tears

To roll in single file

The file in which you saw your father led away in '38.

You took me to your flat-Mutter invited me
With broken words we tried to talk, Mutter and I
You translated—English to German and back again—
She questioned and requested, searching my pedigree
Her lined face showed disapproval
Her sagging shoulders saw an English Jew who knew no Hebrew
Spoke no Yiddish, ate forbidden foods in foster homes
Was far removed from Jewish life and Europe
Had little intellect to share.
Her disapproval ranged to the far corner
I felt its truth
My cheeks aflame allowed no tears
Ashamed to disappoint
Guilt o'erwhelmed me

On the long bus ride to my billet
My tears ran in single file

We spoke softly thereafter, Helga and I
Our bond tightly meshed
Friendships have convoluted faces.



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