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The Pink and Yellow Star

by

Naomi Cahn

An essay written as part of the Writing Programs

Academic Resource Center

Loyola Marymount University

Spring 2014

Late November 1942

She could feel the train lurch forward into the night through the floorboards and the mass of bodies writhing in the cartload with her. In this dark and musty place, she trembled, feeling suffocated and defeated.

Tentatively touching her face where bruises and bloodied scratches were bound to be visible, she mournfully remembered how they'd been caught. She and Cara were discreet, their passionate embraces and loving words flesh and blood in the night, pale phantoms in the chilled light of day. But the Gestapo still managed to find them. Her love, Cara, was able to escape the round-up though she doubted the Gestapo would have harmed her. For Cara Sommer was German, and she, Miriam Hirsch, was Jewish.

And now trapped in a cattle car bound for God knows where.

Two days before...

Miriam left the greengrocer's with the few fruits and vegetables the shop keep was willing to sell her, briskly making her way down the street. To loiter was to be harassed, to be harassed was to call attention to herself, and to call attention to herself was a death sentence. Her brisk pace, however, would not negate the effects of the bold yellow star sewn haphazardly onto the breast of her best jacket. It read *Jude* in accusatory black letters. Even children would jeer at her while their parents looked on with pride, and hardly any shops would serve her or her family. In the wake of the pogrom that erupted over the assassination of a German diplomat in Paris by a

Jewish teen - a boy only a year younger than Miriam - it was even more dangerous to be a Jew in Berlin.¹

Only a little over one hundred and sixty centimeters, Miriam was a petite eighteen year old, one who could easily be lost amongst the clamor of her neighborhood's destruction. Compared to her father and two brothers with stocky builds and features that the NSDAP² would deem distinctly "Slavic" or "Jewish," Miriam was physically more like her mother - a woman of German and British descent who would hardly be defined as "Jewish" by her looks. No, Miriam looked more like the *goyim*³ her brothers disdained but secretly feared would break their family apart with a "warrant" and round-up. Her ash-blonde, wavy bob framed keen, grey eyes and an unassuming nose with thin lips that were almost as pale as her skin. Her looks usually made her feel like an outsider within her own family, but Miriam found that her looks would hardly become an issue once her family realized what she was doing with her *friend*, Cara.

Her thoughts quickly turned to the Berliner that had stolen her heart.

Cara Sommer was as fiery as the red, curly hair that graced her head, and stood out in the seas of grey monotony with her dazzling smile and bright blue eyes. While Miriam was meek and withdrew into herself, afraid of the rapidly changing world around her, Cara was spirited and grabbed life by the horns. Their differing personalities, however, seemed to draw them closer together rather than pull them away from the friendship initially contrived by their families. Her very Catholic mother and Miriam's very Jewish mother became fast friends when both were in the hospital after giving birth to their first-born children. Subsequently, the Sommer and Hirsch

¹ *Kristallnacht* means "Night of Broken Glass" in German.

² Also known as the Nazi Party.

³ *Goyim* is the pejorative Yiddish term for non-Jews.

families were rather close by the time Miriam was born and Cara followed not a month later. From cradle to grammar school, they would do everything together.

As they both came of age, however, the world began to change and them along with it. The NSDAP gained traction all over Germany as the Germans' national pride was slighted by the Treaty of Versailles and the subsequent poverty the foreign powers foisted upon the German people. Miriam and her older brothers were forced out of German schools and into schools specifically for Jews. While the Sommer family disagreed with the NSDAP's race politics and wanted to maintain their friendship with the Hirsch family, their subsistence in the Third Reich depended on their kowtowing the party line and their loyalty as German citizens. Thus, the Sommers cut their ties with the Hirschs and forbade Cara from interacting with Miriam. But the girls had continued their friendship, secretly meeting in an abandoned apartment building.

Except Cara and Miriam's friendship began to morph into something more. Friendly hugs became desperate embraces, and childish hair ruffling became longing caresses. Innocence gave way to an underlying tension that became more apparent as the girls grew into their teenage bodies. For instead of accepting the advances of the Jewish butcher's boy down the street, Miriam found herself smashing her thin lips to Cara's smiling ones. Kissing Cara was like skipping stones at a pond, upsetting the surface tension but bringing catharsis from the external world. Despite the passage of the Nuremberg Laws and the occurrence of Kristallnacht, Cara did not seem to care about the repercussions of their actions, and Miriam was able to overcome her meek and cowardly tendencies, consumed by love for her dauntless Cara.

Pulled from her reverie by Rabbi Baeck's friendly greeting, Miriam realized she had passed her family home and had wandered by the Fasanenstrasse Synagogue - its ruins standing charred and weary, a warning sign that lives could be upended in a heartbeat. She shivered and

doubled back a few blocks until she walked up the steps of her home to unlock the door and found herself in the foyer. Miriam could hear her family shuffling about in the kitchen, packing and preparing to leave Berlin, leave Germany, for an indefinite period of time. Smiling to herself, she waltzed into the kitchen to greet her family and was met by a wall of stony stares.

“Wha-what’s wrong?” she uttered timidly, her smile sliding off and giving way to an anxious countenance.

Her father’s lips thinned into a stern line and spat, “Frau Sommer phoned us and said she caught her daughter with pictures of you. *Recent* and *improper* pictures of you. How *DARE* you put this family at risk? Her *FATHER* is in the Gestapo! We could be *KILLED*! And it is *VILE*, what you are doing with Cara! Where did this *DISEASE* come from? I knew we shouldn’t have let you play sports, and we should have forced you to accept the butcher’s boy’s marriage proposal! Now, you’re *SHTUPPING*⁴ a *GIRL*. This is what we get for indulging you! What do you have to say for yourself?”

Miriam cowered for a moment before realizing that Cara could be in trouble. She had to get to Cara. She drew strength from her frantic need to find her lover and forcefully retorted, “I *love* her, Papa, as she loves me! And you can’t keep us apart!”

With that declaration, Miriam ran from the room and slammed the front door, her mother’s sobs still ringing in her ears. She fled into her neighborhood’s desolate streets with little thought to the sun slinking meekly into the horizon, yielding to angry storm clouds gathering above. Her mind was consumed by worry over how her parents would punish her and whether or not Cara was safe.

⁴ *Shtupping* is Yiddish for “fornicating.”

Would her parents leave Germany without her? Leave the continent without her? And what would become of Cara? Of herself?

A “*Judensau*,”⁵ *puh*, and *splat* drew Miriam’s attention out of her mind and to the outer edges of her periphery: an NSDAP soldier was heckling a *bubbe*⁶ and her young, clearly disabled grandson - both dressed in what could only be described as rags. She wanted to stop in her tracks and deflect the officer’s attentions away from the elderly woman, who shuffled nervously about as her knuckles turned white from her strong grasp on the child leaning heavily on her for support. But thoughts of Cara bubbled through her anger, and Miriam realized that she would not find Cara if she drew attention to herself so close to curfew. With a bitterness lingering in her suddenly dry mouth, Miriam continued her journey to where she hoped Cara would be: the abandoned apartment building where their friendship turned to fervent love.

Sure enough, Cara was already there, crying softly while wrapping her arms around herself. Miriam rushed over to Cara and hugged her tightly to her small frame, her courage rapidly wearing off with the adrenaline.

“Cara,” she whispered with relief into red curls, and Cara weakly nudged out of their tight embrace to meet Miriam’s lips with her own.

“Cara,” Miriam whispered again, this time her worry seeping into her tone, “we need to get out of here.”

“I know,” Cara replied, “but where will we go?”

Before Miriam could answer, screeching tires and barking dogs interrupted their moment, and she pushed Cara away from her.

“Run, *meine Liebste*,” Miriam pleaded, “It’ll be worse if they catch you here with me.”

⁵ *Judensau* is German for “Jewish pig.” It was a popularized term in Nazi Germany.

⁶ *Bubbe* is Yiddish for “grandmother.”

With tears streaming down her cheeks, Cara nodded and sobbed, “*Ich liebe dich, Miri,*” before she ran out the back door of the building to safety.⁷

Miriam bravely turned to face the giant front doors of the building lobby just as the Gestapo broke through the door - as if it were a toothpick and not the solid wooden door meant to keep brash storms from barging in on unassuming tenants. The ringleader of this particular unit was Dr. Sommer, Cara’s father. She hardly recognized Dr. Sommer as he almost blended in with the pack of jeering goose-steppers behind him. The belted, cold grey jacket with matching trousers tucked into iconic black boots and the peaked cap that hid his brown locks framed a jarring image in her mind. Dressed in the garb of her family’s greatest fear and enemy, it was hard for Miriam to reconcile Dr. Sommer with the kind man she had seen as a child - the kind man who patched up her knees and playfully ruffled Cara’s hair to lightly admonish her for allowing Miriam to fall in the first place. This man appeared to be gone, a cold-hearted cog in the NSDAP’s Jew-hating machine.

He smirked at her and said, “You Jews are all the same. Degenerates, the whole lot of you. No wonder your parents squealed like little *Judenschwein*⁸ to save their own hides. I hear that someone’s been a naughty little girl, defiling Aryan women. By the way where is your victim, *Liebchen*?⁹ My daughter? If you tell us where she ran off to, we’ll send you to a *better* place.”

The other Gestapo crowed in delight, their “pretty,” *Aryan* faces twisted in ecstasy. In her mind, Miriam likened them to the rose bushes she would avoid as a youth when playing in the

⁷ *Meine Liebste* is German for “my darling” while *Ich liebe dich* is German for “I love you.”

⁸ German for “Jewish pigs.”

⁹ German for “little girl.”

local park: the plants' flowers were gorgeous, all sorts of colors, yet the gnarled and thorny branches drew blood if one was foolish enough to cross the bushes.

A Gestapo operative - to Dr. Sommer's left - giggled shrilly, and Miriam turned from her childhood memories to scowl.

"Jah! A better place!" he sneered enthusiastically.

Indignant anger frothed within Miriam, and she opened her mouth to tell Dr. Sommer where he could stick his shiny black boots when she noticed the sorrowful regret in his eyes, noticed his almost imperceptible nervous tick of the lips that he'd always had when trying to seriously discipline his beloved daughter. She then knew that Dr. Sommer did not want to do this, that his little speech was an act for those watching. He was still the kind man who patched up scrapes, couldn't truly discipline his children, and would probably go home that night and cry into the bundle that was his newborn son - hoping that his son would never have to do what he was doing to Miriam now. Because despite the vehemently violent reaction to homosexuality in the Third Reich, Dr. Sommer could never deny his daughter anything and had always seen Miriam as a second daughter before circumstances forced him to choose between remaining friends with the Hirschs and keeping his family alive.

So Miriam did the only thing she felt she could do in her situation: she gathered her courage, surreptitiously winked at Dr. Sommer, and audaciously declared, "I will not give up her location." Dr. Sommer smiled, apologies written in his eyes, and turned to the other Gestapo.

"Seize her."

And with those words, she crumpled to the ground, her bravado lost as boots made contact with her face and harsh hands roughly grabbed her wrists.

One and a half weeks later...

It had been days, perhaps weeks, since she'd felt anything besides the sealed wooden wall of the cattle car and human decay. Miriam could not tell who was alive and who was dead as the light from the car's few windows was blocked with human bodies packed in like sardines. The stench of waste and death permeated throughout the cattle car, but at least the children had stopped crying - whether it was because they had run out of tears or because they had succumbed to their hunger or asphyxiation was unclear.

When she had initially woken up in this cartload, disoriented and battered, Miriam was surrounded by people she vaguely knew. The Jewish butcher down the street - what was his name? Bauer? Bauman? Perhaps it was Behr? - and his family were there, and the *bubbe* she had seen on the street earlier was there with her disabled grandson. He was sobbing into her ratty shawl, and the *bubbe* could only rub the top of his head with her frail hands, her eyes closed and face uplifted as she muttered prayers under her breath to anyone who would listen... could listen. The sobs, curses, prayers, and hysterical questions formed an impenetrable cacophony, or so Miriam thought until she heard a high-pitched wail pierce the din.

But surely not...

That couldn't be...

Miriam pushed the palms of her hands into her ears, trying to dull the unforgiveable sound of a baby crying. She had thought she was the youngest in the transport, had thought that the NSDAP would spare the innocent and defenseless. Tears forged trails down her deeply scratched cheeks, the saltiness stinging the fresh wounds. And so Miriam cried until she managed to pull her limbs to her bruised chest and curl into a fetal position along the side of her prison, the lack of fresh air wearing away at her consciousness until her eyes shut.

Her days passed with bouts of unwanted consciousness and longer stretches of blessed unconsciousness, the darkness eating away at her willingness to see the horrors around her. While Miriam could not escape the cattle car, she could shut her eyes and imagine smiling, luscious lips, clear blue eyes, and flaming red curls. Her lover's name was constantly on her lips when she slept, and Miriam dreamt of frolicking through golden fields with Cara, light and carefree melodies floating through the crisp air. The sun filtered through Cara's locks, as if she had a fiery halo, was an angel. She also dreamt of her family, happily singing and gathering round their kitchen table to eat their *Shabbat*¹⁰ dinner. But the joyous scene turned to one of pain as the room spontaneously became embroiled in flames and Miriam's lungs filled with smoke, the food ash in her mouth as she relapsed into reality and remembered her parents' betrayal.

Miriam woke up with a jolt as the train came to a stop.

She had no idea how long they had been in this cartload, but she was relieved at the prospect that this may be the final stop. The previous times the train had stopped, the operators had not let its unwilling passengers off the train, leaving for indefinite periods of time and coming back when it suited them.

A gasp brought Miriam's attention to the present, and she opened her eyes only to be blinded by... light.

The cart's sturdy, wooden door was open.

People in striped uniforms began to grab Miriam's "travel companions" and push them forcefully from the train until they pulled her from her prison, pushing her to the ground with the others. Miriam's senses were promptly overloaded with the sharp sunlight, the biting cold

¹⁰ *Shabbat* is Hebrew for "sabbath."

nipping at her nose, the harsh commands officers spat at her, and the distinct smell of burning flesh that pervaded the air and filled her lungs. Perhaps someone was cooking meat nearby?

“*AUFSTEHEN!*”

“*SCHNELLER!*”¹¹

She was pushed with the Jews from her cartload toward a long line of other prisoners along a barbed wire fence. It wasn't until her grey eyes landed on the black, wrought-iron sign presiding over the proceedings that she felt a distinct dread.

*Arbeit Macht Frei?*¹²

¹¹ *Aufstehen* is German for “get up.”; *Schneller* is German for “faster.”

¹² A German phrase for “Work makes you free.”