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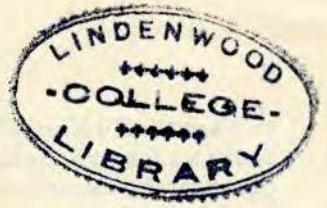
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## Weary Alien

Betty Hurwich

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## Prize Essay

# WEARY ALIEN

*By Bette Hurwich, Lindenwood College, Missouri*

(WINIFRED BURNS, INSTRUCTOR)

EDGAR SMITH always frightened me. He shoved me into the cement mixture which was being prepared to mend cracks in the walk; he chased me with a short length of heavy pipe; he threatened to shove me over the railing of the viaduct which we crossed on our way home from school, and he would have done it if none had been about to tattle.

A year after we moved into our new home in a recently developed suburb of the city, the Smiths rented a house two lots over. I was then seven years old. Mrs. Smith, a rectangle of big bones with a knot of skimpy clay-colored hair, spoke often and deprecatingly of "pore white trash," Catholics, and "dirty niggers." I can remember no Mr. Smith, so perhaps there was none, for the impression the rest of the family made on me has never been removed. Margaret, a few years older than Edgar and already a hypocritical little cat, pretended to be my friend, but she never returned the delightful volume of Robert Louis Stevenson's poetry or the handsomely illustrated Grimm's *Fairy Tales* I lent her. Three years older than I in years and ten years older in his comprehension of ugly things was Edgar, a bully, a brute, a demon of a boy.

One day the neighborhood youngsters were in the Smiths' kitchen where Mrs. Smith was stingily portioning amongst us the burnt cookies of the large batch she had just baked. Suddenly Edgar pointed at me and screeched,

"She shoan't get any! She's a nasty ole dirty Jew! That's why her pa has money. All Jews are rich. 'N when she grows up she'll be an ole funny-lookin' thing with an ole awful nose!" The accusation appalled me, since to my knowledge I was exactly like anyone else, and no one had ever spoken to me in such a manner. I felt my nose and looked at Edgar and wondered if my father really were rich, and if I were a "dirty ole nasty Jew," and if I were, what was one? Mrs. Smith did not turn from the cookies she was baking for a church social (indeed yes, Mrs. Smith was a prominent church worker), nor did she rebuke Edgar.

One of the children piped, "What did she do, Edgar? Why is she dirty?"

Snarled Edgar, "Aw, she killed Christ. Nobody likes Jews. They have n't got a real religion or anything."

That gave me something substantial on which to base my defense. Even then I was a stubborn, determined person. I declared vehemently, "I never killed a thing. My father never killed a thing. His father never killed a thing. None of us ever killed anything. I won't take your ole cookies. I am every bit as good as you. So there!"

Mrs. Smith's strident voice arrested me as I stalked out. "The Jews killed Christ. The Bible says so. But we Ku Kluxers will fix it. . . ." I waited to hear no more, but ran home sobbing bitterly.

When the Ku Klux Klan collapsed in Indiana a few months later, the Smiths disappeared. Edgar was gone, but his repulsive leering face and his taunts are with me ever, the embodiment of anti-Semitism.

Perhaps seven was not too early to realize that there is an everlasting pogrom, a pogrom of acrimony and antipathy. In these United States, where four and a half millions of the world's Jewry are concentrated, there is a pogrom, one as brutal and vicious as any of the Russia and Poland of a not too remote time; one that bars a girl from sororities, prevents her from being accepted in certain positions, creates in her a rankling ache of inferiority. Edgar made me aware of my difference: he cast me within the pale. Remarks which previously had floated over me like a breeze now caused a catch in my throat and a blush. I began to dread Christmas, when my classmates would inquire what Santa was bringing me and teachers would demand in front of the entire group whether I could sing the carols or if my mother desired that I be dropped from practice. Mother had directed those carols when she taught school, and she understood the difficulties I should encounter without stressing any dissimilarities. I sang carols and hymns, recited prayers, danced around Christmas trees, portrayed the Madonna in a pageant, and enjoyed it all. To me, then and now, all religion is too fundamentally analogous to be the controversial subject it is.

Jewish holidays were worse than Christian, for it was necessary that I be excused on the high days of Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) and Rosh Hashanah (New Year's Day). Because we are members of a reformed temple those two were all we observed strictly, but Sammie, the son of a fish peddler, from the wrong part of town, was orthodox, and absent on every minor holy

day. A flush would heat me when he would return to school, slovenly, boisterous, and definitely "kike," bellowing that he never saw me at *Shul* and that I was little better than a pork-eater. Little snob that I was, I feigned not to understand or recognize him. I did not want my faith known. It was a paradoxical situation: petty to be ashamed of being a Jew, and yet absurd to emphasize that fact.

Mother instructed me that the correct term to place on cumulative record cards beside the word "nationality" was American. Judaism was my religion, she explained, just as Catholicism and Methodism may be the creeds of others. My companions would not understand, she further stated, and therefore I must never make an issue of it. Her philosophy was admirable, although it would appear deceitful to old-school orthodoxy, and it saved me numberless hurts. I was never called "Sheenie," "Christ-killer," or any of the stinging epithets that little boys yowled at Sammie; nevertheless, I flinched for him, because he was invulnerable: his orthodox training had taught him to flaunt his Jewishness.

My education progressed, marred only by three incidents. Two teachers have emblazoned themselves on my memory. In a tactless moment, my sixth-grade instructress demanded of the class who, in their opinions, were the best students. After a brief discussion she decided for them, naming Oscar, Louise, and Bette—the only Jewish children in school at that time. For the rest of that semester we three, who scarcely knew each other, found ourselves all but ostracized from the groups which gathered in the corners of the playground. They stared at us, trying to probe the discrepancies between us and themselves, wondering and whispering. Two years later the teacher who was aiding me in planning my high-school

course attempted some sincere advice. She floundered, and could not bring herself to use the words she needed to express her idea. I must, she told me, strive to keep myself more in the background. Here she found herself unable to retract her statement or elucidate it. She forced herself on, stating that I must conceal some of what I knew about my lessons and not flaunt my superior preparation. I was puzzled and aghast: we had been instructed to raise our hands when we knew the answers and wished to communicate them. Oscar, who continued in the same classes with me, and I almost monopolized recitations. It could not be to our discredit that we liked our work, wanted to prove our preparation, that our classmates were too dull or jejune to present their information. Not for years did I realize that she had been striving to inform me that everyone, everywhere, resents the superiority of a Jew.

High school presented varied problems, which I immediately and completely banished from my mind. We were beginning to attend evening functions with boys, and I found myself popular in the elite cliques. I refused to accept invitations from Jewish boys, because I realized that being a Jew was a detriment. Despite Mother's disapproval, I soon was escorted to every affair by one boy, who would delight Hitler as a "pure Aryan" type. My parents liked him, he liked me, and the religious question had never been raised. I made myself forget it. One evening his mother phoned me and asked me to assist her in planning a surprise party in honor of his birthday. I was pleased until she mentioned the day, which was Yom Kippur Eve. "Oh darn!" I ejaculated. "It will be impossible for me to come, but I will do whatever I can to help."

"But why can't you come?" she inquired pleasantly.

"It's Yom Kippur Eve, and we all go to temple," I explained.

"Pardon me, dear, I don't believe I quite understood you."

I realized that she evidently did not suspect my religion. I mentally jabbed myself and enunciated clearly. "It is a Jewish holy day, a very important holy day, and I must attend services with my parents."

Her response came slowly, as though the words were being forced out, syllable by syllable; "That is a shame. Good-bye." Click went the hook.

During a dance this Christmas vacation I discovered myself whirling with him. He began, quite simply, "I've been wanting to explain something to you for four years. I knew you were Jewish and did not care. Mother made me feel that I was ruining my life going so constantly with you." He tangled himself in his explanation, but I knew that underneath his opaque words lay this: "Bette, it is a shame you were born a Jewess, because it spoiled your chances with me, and it will for everything else."

My former philosophy was: You did not ask to be born a Jew, why should you suffer for it? You do not care what your religion is; you do not even care about religion. What is this fate handed you? A marking evident as Rebecca's yellow cap. I thought I could change a single letter of my name, erasing its Semitic derivation, and cast off the stigma which is part of the heritage of the oppressed race.

Now my philosophy is changed. I realize that my mother was wrong. Being Jewish signifies more than belonging to a religious sect. No aspect of my life — economic, social, or religious — can remain untouched by the basic principles of Judaism, my stateless nationality.

My ancestors, children of the Diaspora who were bound in a ghetto, engaged in petty commerce, living in

poverty, were in better circumstances than I. They had their sincere faith in God and His covenant to cling to. Under constant tension, concomitant strife, they were united, happy — if Jews were ever happy — with their own kind. I am caught in a chaos of inconsistency, caring nothing for religion, but bowing to my faith.

Those two unsavory economic pursuits which were open to the ghetto Jew, moneylending and trivial commerce, still mark our economic make-up. Bargainers "jew-down" merchants, misers "hoard like Shylocks" — such is our shining reputation. From the insignificant minority of nineteenth-century Jews who were engaged in respectable occupations, 70 per cent are prospering in trade and industry, 7 per cent in the professions and government, and 5 per cent in agriculture. We are now censured for being prosperous, educated, and cultured, and are being accused of snatching what is due Gentiles. Almost anything has been and can be blamed on the Jews. We have produced outstanding musicians, actors, artists, and writers in greater ratio to our numbers than any other race. We have been among the leaders in the struggle for political freedom. We see thaumaturgic visions of a world at peace; a world of brotherhood and contentment. Yet we are everlasting strangers to the world — the Eternal Jew, tragic, incongruous, and incomprehensible.

The world is again accenting nationalism and its serving-maid, anti-Semitism. Our social and political autonomy has long since vanished, and now, to exist, we must further forget our mores and institutions. Assimilation, intermarriage, conversion — all fail. It is my conviction that those who cowered before the Pharaohs, those who renounced their God to save themselves from the Spanish Inquisition but kept the Talmud active in

their memories, those who laid down their lives, did it, not for religion solely, but for their heritage, their tradition, their race. Once a Jew, always a Jew. Inside anyone with the merest drop of Hebrew blood are the tinge and trace of Israel. There is a brotherhood among us that no other race can feel. We are often ashamed of our people: those who flaunt their newly acquired riches; those who endeavor to lose their racial characteristics and refuse to associate with other Jews; those who are crude, vulgar, and clamor to thrust themselves into prominence. However, we feel our relationship and defend them — not only because of the paucity who attain the rank they deserve, but also because each aggrandizement renews our faith in our abilities.

When the Hebrews shifted from the East to the West in the Middle Ages in a transfer from the Orient to the Occident, their spiritual beings underwent no similar metamorphosis. We are still Oriental, mutable, and mystic. There is nothing sudden about us, except our excitability. We move like the gentle rolls of an inland sea which can be frothed into action, flaying its waves into loud fury which subsides before reaching the climax of its anger. We have lived in every country of the world. We have spoken and written in Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, Arabic, Yiddish, French, German, Italian, Spanish, and English. We can be found anywhere — New York, London, Johannesburg, Moscow, Shanghai, Buenos Aires, Jerusalem. Through thirty centuries of ravages we have revealed our stamina, our strength that was built on the suffering and disappointment of these centuries. God's chosen people? Are we not His forgotten? Are we not condemned to tragic existence?

I sensed the spirit of twentieth-century Jewish youth. I hate my fate. How can I find comfort and beauty in a God who has separated me so complete-

ly from my contemporaries? To what religion can I attach faith? Christianity preaches brotherhood. Brotherhood, for what? So that a girl, doubtless from a fine Presbyterian family, could whisper to me, not realizing my religion, "How can you stand to pal around with that Levy girl? Don't you know she's Jewish?" Brotherhood, so that a man could rise from the German masses to purge his country of Jews in a manner too reminiscent of the Inquisition? Brotherhood, so that all who are n't Christians can be hounded until and beyond eternity! Judaism preaches salvation. Salvation, when and for what? Thirty centuries have we suffered. Will there be another thirty? A few years ago I contemplated forgetting I was a Jewess. It is not possible. Religion can go, rites can go, but that constraining emotion persists, and I remain, a child of Israel.

What will be our future? Are we the eternal people? Are we beyond re-

covery, or is our greatness yet to be fulfilled? The question is not of physical survival, for our population has increased five times since 1789. It is of maintaining our individuality as a race, as builders of the temples and the prophets. The religious element has lost its force; we are not, like the Maccabees, fanatic enough to fight or die for our God. All that unites us is the shadow of Abraham's covenant. I think it folly to attempt the re-creation of the Holy Land, as the Zionists plan. I deem it ridiculous to congregate in myriad meaningless groups which talk, make motions, but never move, never improve the situation, and always intensify it. I care not if we survive. I am proud of our great intellects, proud of our heritage, but I ache with dissatisfaction. I refuse to be segregated into a ghetto, for that is what any entirely Jewish community would develop into; I refuse to propagate my unhappy race; I am wearied with being an alien.

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