The Tiger in the Attic

Memories of the Kindertransport and Growing Up English

Edith Milton
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For Peter and Jeremy and Naomi.
And for Ruth, who was there.
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The first thing I remember about being in England is Aunt Helen trying to put me on her lap. We are on a train taking us from London to Swansea, and since I speak no English it is difficult to resolve my urgent need to get off the lap of this woman I have never seen before. Not, at least, without becoming impolite about it. I have been warned of dire consequences if I fail to be polite when I get to England.

Luckily, my sister Ruth is along. Ruth speaks English. “I have to go the bathroom,” I tell her in German. She translates this for the woman with the lap, who threatens to get up and take me there. “Not her. You have to take me,” I say to Ruth.

My poor sister—she is thirteen, an awkward age at best, and the Basic English she has learned at school has never been tested on a native speaker. I have admired and adored her from afar for years—my handsome, scornful, heroic sister, six years older than I am and good at sports—but at that point she must be loathing me. “If you don’t make that woman put me down,” I tell her when we are finally alone.
in the corridor heading towards the toilet, which in fact I do not need, “I will start screaming.”

But by the time we get back to the compartment, nothing needs to be explained after all: the woman’s lap has been magically withdrawn from combat and is no longer a menace. It is filled with egg salad sandwiches, and I can settle down in my own and distant corner to eat one without fear of further interference.

* 

I do not remember the journey before that, though I know it was a journey of children: children of every age and size and condition. I vaguely recall weeping adults, my mother presumably among them, although I do not remember her. They stood, blocked by wooden barriers, as we were taken along the platform and put into railway compartments, which I seem to remember had hard, slatted seats. There was a boy, a country boy I suppose, with a huge basket of strawberries that he handed around to us all. The guard came by now and then and made jokes, and the officer in uniform and with a swastika armband who collected our papers at the border looked upon me with what I took to be parental concern as he handed back my passport, which under my name—augmented by the Jewish “Sara” mandated by the Third Reich—had been stamped Stateless. I remember feeling a shy affection for him, a sense of safety in traveling in this carriage under his care.

I know that to cross to England we boarded the boat at Rotterdam. I know this because I had thought we would go through Amsterdam, which I had read about in the Bibi books of Karen Michaelis; Rotterdam, unsung in literature, was a great disappointment, which I resented enough to file firmly in memory. But the crossing itself is a blank. Probably we were all asleep. The next day comes to mind as the revelation of a huge London station with massive steel arches over-
head. Liverpool Street Station. There were, I think, people at tables who shuffled through papers and who spoke an incomprehensible language that I knew must be English. I was wearing a brown hat with a rolled-up brim, and there were labels pinned to my collar and dangling from the various buttons of my new brown coat.

And then a tall, thin, aquiline woman, encased in a tweed suit that looked as if it would cause severe abrasions to any skin with which it came in contact, emerged from the crowd to lay claim to this refugee package from Germany, and she led us away.

* 

That point of my life is where my real memory begins. My earlier recollections are not much more than mental snapshots of discrete moments, deprived of emotional content and affect. Or if there is any emotion, it tends towards shame, which I have somehow breathed in during my last year there, from the air of Karlsruhe. I understand, for instance, when my best friend Ursula no longer comes to my house, that shame must be the element that most properly belongs to me. When I go to visit her, her mother will not open the gate, and when on my way home three children call out names at me which I completely fail to comprehend, I nevertheless know them to be shameful.

One day, coming home from school, I see a quartet of Hitler Jugend knocking on the door; they are rattling coins in round tins marked with swastikas in which they are collecting money for some worthy Nazi cause. I have been told that we never give money to the Hitler Jugend’s worthy causes and that we regard swastikas as hostile emblems. I shrink against the privet hedge, trying to be invisible, and am preparing myself to run away when, to my embarrassment, I find that terror has just made me pee in my pants. Luckily, however, the Jugendbund has given up knocking and is running down the path, going right past me on their way out. They are chatting and still rattling their tins and
seem totally unaware of my shame: my twin shames, actually—of being Jewish and being incontinent. But even when they are gone, I am so overwhelmed by humiliation that for several minutes I can’t move.

Shame is there in abundance. Other emotions, other moods, seem to have evaporated from the scenes I call up for myself.

My father’s death, for instance, is encapsulated in a single image of a featureless figure wrapped head to toe in bandages, looking, I have lately come to think, more like the Michelin man or the Pillsbury Doughboy than a human being—though unlike the Michelin man and the Doughboy this creature does not have a face. I suppose I am extrapolating from the bandages around my father’s head at the time he died—of uremic poisoning from a carbuncle at the base of his neck. In my waking life there were never any particular feelings associated with this apparition—no fear or affection or yearning—though throughout my childhood it consistently invaded my dreams and led them into nightmare.

Up to that moment when Aunt Helen collected us it is as though I had flattened everything out for easy storage, and to make things simpler I seem to have removed the sound track as well. But in that second-class compartment, halfway between London and Swansea, my memory springs into three dimensions—becomes, I suppose, normal. It decorates itself with words and sounds and feelings; it attaches itself to things like regret and pleasure. None of this is entirely reliable, of course—over the years the landscape of memory shifts and its details rearrange themselves; or it fails to shift and one knows that what is being remembered is not a memory anymore at all—that it has petrified into myth.

But, as I say, all that is normal, more or less. And in some way impossible to define my life begins when I am seven going on eight—when I have just set foot in England. It is 1939—the end of April or perhaps the beginning of May. By the time the train has arrived in Swansea and the taxi has driven us to Aunt Helen’s house, it is early evening.
The house is huge, much grander than anything we have ever lived in in Karlsruhe. A young woman wearing a black dress and a little white apron opens the door for us and takes our bags; she is wearing a starched white cotton tiara thing on her head like the women who served Mandeltorte and Schillerlocken in the Konditorei on Kaiserstrasse. Aunt Helen has taken my reluctant hand and is leading me upstairs, followed by two of our suitcases under the care of the young woman in black. Ruth trails behind; the rucksack containing our papers and disposable treasure (two Swiss watches and some gold and platinum jewelry in case there should be an emergency need for ready cash) is clutched to her heart. Aunt Helen did try at the door to separate Ruth from the rucksack, a move that established an even firmer bond between them. Ruth and rucksack are now inseparable.

But when we get to the room where we are to sleep, she loosen her clutch a little; the two beds are turned down and there are two bowls of steaming, creamy mushroom soup on the bedside table. There is a fire in the fireplace too, and the curtains breathing at the slightly opened window frame a twilight view of a walled spring garden beyond which there is a distant glimmer of sea.

*  

There were four Harveys. Aunt Helen you have already met, but at her introduction she was wearing a Harris Tweed suit—topped by a sprightly fedora that I did not mention, with a rakish little feather in it announcing its readiness for battle. But that was a different Aunt Helen from the one who floated in through the firelight an hour later to kiss us goodnight—our soup finished, our cup of Horlick’s drunk, our pajamas already on. This white-gowned woman, the new Aunt Helen, had about her the aroma of something wonderful: roses, perhaps, and lavender.

I had never eaten mushroom soup in bed before or drunk Horlick’s; I had never walked down two miles of corridor before to go to
the bathroom. I had certainly never been kissed before by someone wearing an evening gown. Kissed, more or less, by two people in evening clothes, because right behind Aunt Helen came Uncle Bourke, and he was wearing what I know now beyond a reasonable doubt to have been a dinner jacket. Not that it was exactly me he kissed. It was the air three inches above my right ear and three inches to the right of the spot of my scalp that still held the memory of Aunt Helen’s good-night on it.

It was a ritual, an unaltering expression of affection balanced exquisitely with reticence, which was conducted every night for the seven years we were in England.

By then we had already been introduced to the other two Harveys, Valerie and Diana, whose room—not surprisingly, considering the distance covered—was on the way to the bathroom. Aunt Helen, who was then still in her tweed persona, had stopped by during our induction into the arcane British mysteries of having the bath and the toilet in separate enclaves.

Both the girls had been in bed reading when she had knocked on their door. “Here they are, girls,” she announced, and they had both looked up from their books and told us “Hullo” with a show of some enthusiasm. Their hair, I noted with envy, was light brown and long—Valerie wore hers in two fat braids, and Diana had a single elegant braid so long that it disappeared under the blanket. It was what I had longed for since birth or maybe before. Briefly, just after my grandfather, Opa, died and when my father was sick, while the grown-ups, in fact, were thinking of other things, I did achieve two short little plaits that stuck out proudly like low-slung horns just above my ears, but normally my fashion-conscious mother would take me off to be bobbed or shingled or curled, and the Heidi look I yearned for would escape me once more.

Valerie was nine, Diana eleven at the time, and I saw them both immediately as My Ideal. True, at first, it was only a matter of hair, but
coiffure goes a long way, even when you are seven. It tells you almost everything you need to know; and I recognized at once that most of my life I would strive to be exactly like them, and that I would fail.

*  
The two smiling, interchangeable, pajama-clad little girls with those long brown braids I so much coveted, turned out, of course, not to be quite as much alike as my first, admiring assessment of them told me they must be. I suppose, through the sense of my own difference, I saw them as a matched set of sorts; it took familiarity to recognize their distance from each other.

Diana, even at eleven, had something of her mother’s chiseled profile, softened by childhood and by an extraordinary gentleness of disposition into cameo perfection. She had the face that, traced in marble, hovers above the tombstones of those who died young—and she had the quiet, softly melancholy soul to go with it. Valerie was made of harder and brighter stuff. At the age of nine she was already looking out at the world through the little, round spectacles with tortoise-shell rims that stayed with her for the rest of her life and that seemed to sharpen any landscape she saw and transform it into something rich with potential amusement. She was quick and clever at everything that mattered to me, from word games to playing cricket. Both girls liked to draw and paint, but while Diana worked on surprisingly accomplished portraits of horses, Valerie created zoos of invented monsters and a Noah’s ark filled with gryphons and unicorns, afloat on a foaming turquoise sea.

Diana was shy and somehow still; Valerie sparkled. It was not always with the sparkle of happiness, either—particularly not when I was around. With dismal regularity over the years she would cast a shining load of scorn upon me with the casual delivery of those who are without doubt. “You’re hopeless,” she would tell me, referring to