

The Star of David

by Jack Swenson

The goofy streets in Amsterdam had missing teeth. Our Dutch friends told us that in these gaps had been houses that the Nazis tore down for firewood. After the war, the Dutch left the empty spaces as reminders of the occupation, even though housing was sorely needed.

This was 1960, and you really could live in Europe on five dollars a day. Maarten and Willem showed us where we could get a good meal cheap. They knew all the good bars, too.

Everybody in Amsterdam spoke English, and unlike the French, they didn't pretend that they didn't.

Willem was a big fellow, all arms and legs, who told wonderful stories about what it was like during the war. The Nazis thought everyone was a Jew, he said. Once he was being interrogated by a Nazi officer, and the officious German asked Willem if he were Jewish. "No, I'm Catholic," Willem said. "Ah," the German replied. "A Catholic Jew!"

Maarten was a short, stout, friendly fellow. He was on the outs with his wealthy family, probably because he had absolutely no pretensions and no ambition. They paid him a pittance to stay out of their hair. He spent his days hanging out with his friends and drinking beer. He spoke perfect English.

One night the two American girls whom I was traveling with and I were at his tiny apartment. Willem was there, and I can't remember who else, probably Katrina, a pretty blonde with hairy legs, who for some reason had taken a dislike to me. Maybe she didn't like Americans. Who knows?

Anyway, somebody was telling a story, and I idly picked up a black covered book on the fireplace mantel. When I opened it, something fell out and fluttered to the floor. It was a six-pointed star. I picked it up and replaced it in the book. No one said a word. Finally Maarten said the fabric emblem was something he had to wear during the war. I knew about the Star of David and the occupation. At least I knew about it. I didn't know what it was like, but I'm sure the Dutch people did. They knew it in their teeth and bones.

