

# **Flying against the Wind: The Story of a Young Woman Who Defied the Nazis**

## **Short Guide**

### **Flying against the Wind: The Story of a Young Woman Who Defied the Nazis by Ina R. Friedman**

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## Overview

Lodgepole Press published Friedman's novel, *Flying against the Wind* in 1995. This remarkable biographical portrait of Cato Bontjes Van Beeks takes place in Germany during Hitler's emergence and subsequent command of the country. This gifted young woman's incredible courage, spirit, and sense of justice led her to join the nonJewish Germans who rejected Hitler's plan and worked for the restoration of individual rights.

As readers encounter the harrowing experience of Hitler's effects on the world, they witness a young woman who stood by her beliefs even though they led to her death. She did not bow to peer pressure or deceitful ways. Instead, she carried an enduring sense of herself throughout her ordeals, successfully making a positive difference in a dark era of world history.



## About the Author

Ina Rosen Friedman was born January 5, 1926, in Chester, Pennsylvania. She was the daughter of Jacob Sidney, a paper jobber, and Libby Leibowitz Rosen, a homemaker.

Exploring old things started as a young child for Rosen. She would visit her father's wholesale paper company that sold paper bags, napkins, toilet paper, sticky tape, school supplies, and even Halloween masks.

She would take the creaky elevator to the warehouse's third floor and poke around in the boxes that held little-known treasures from the early twentieth century.

Rosen also showed an interest in writing as a child. She wrote plays and short stories, but the fear of being laughed at prevented her from showing them to anyone.

Friedman received her bachelor of arts degree from Pennsylvania State University in 1946. The author married Sol Friedman on August 11, 1946. They raised four children: Ronne, Wendy, Lynn, and Loren. After becoming a widow on November 15, 1973, she married Sam D. Starobin on March 12, 1977.

A lecturer, writer, American-Jewish author, and storyteller, Friedman belongs to the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI), National Writer's Union, New England Storytelling Center, and the National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling. She writes nonfiction, biographies, collective biographies, and books for young children.

The author has received several awards for her work. Her book, *How My Parents Learned to Eat*, won a Christopher Award for promoting cultural understanding. *Flying against the Wind* was also named a Notable Book in the Field of Social Studies by the National Council for the Social Studies and the Children's Book Council.

As Friedman researched her second book on the holocaust, *The Other Victims: First Person Stories of Non-Jews Persecuted by the Nazis*, a friend suggested that she interview the family of Cato (pronounced "kah-TOE") Bontjes van Beek. Initially, Friedman had planned to include the Bontjes van Beek's story in her book. However, once she heard Cato defied the Nazis when few Germans dared to resist them, she realized Cato's story would make an excellent book.

The Bontjes van Beek's family gave Cato's letters containing poignant details to Friedman. Friedman interviewed family and friends in England and in the United States to gather additional facts. Soon, *Flying against the Wind* took flight.

Friedman emphasizes that writing is "fascinating but it also contains 'drudge' work, such as rewriting and rewriting and rewriting." Friedman admits that writing has taken her all over the world and it has led her to a second career as storyteller. She returned to school to earn a master's degree in storytelling from Lesley College.



"Keep writing, take writing courses to improve, show your work to people who can give you constructive criticism, and have faith in yourself," Friedman encourages budding writers. Most writers must submit their work to countless editors before one is accepted. She said in an e-mail interview: "Don't get discouraged. Take writing courses from time to time or get into a writing group. Writers need to support each other with an interchange of ideas and suggestions."

The author lectures, presents storytelling programs, and gives workshops on writing, publishing, and publicizing books. As well as gardening, cooking, swimming, and tennis, Friedman enjoys theater, travel, and collecting oral histories. She lives in Brookline, Massachusetts with her second husband.

# Setting

The novel opens with Cato Bontjes van Beek's standing in Berlin's notorious Alexanderplatz Prison in March of 1943. Cato stands beneath a tiny barred window of her jail cell, pondering how she received a conviction of treason against Hitler. She quietly retrieves a flower her mother placed on her clean laundry. Friedman describes Cato's isolation and longing for human company, and her hope that her death sentence will be commuted to life in prison. Cato copes by singing and waiting daily for the sunlight to shine through her tiny window.

Friedman flashes back to 1920. She introduces Cato's parents and their families. She describes their backgrounds and lets readers know how Cato entered her warm, noisy, and exhilarating family on November 14, 1920.

Friedman takes readers through Cato's life, showing in many ways that she is like each reader. She enjoyed sports, playing, and climbing trees with friends and family.

Friedman points out the strong will and determination that Cato had from childhood—organizing her playmates for games and following her inner guidance.

The author provides poignant details on Cato's life and death as a resister to the Nazis. She includes information extracted from Cato's letters and diary, from interviews with her sister and confidante, Mietje (pronounced "MEET-chee"), her mother Olga, and from several cousins and family members. She includes interviews with childhood friends in Great Britain and Berlin, Germany. Files from Heinz Hoehne provided her with information about the Russian Spy Ring, Red Orchestra.

The author sets the topography and political climate. From Cato's small town of Fischerhude with her family, the first part of the book shows her childhood years filled with outdoor activities, school, and nature. Friedman gives readers peeks into Cato's fiercely independent and creative character as the oldest child in her family.

She informs readers of the people that inspired and encouraged Olga through their acts of risk-taking and bravery, including pilots Amelia Earhart and Hans Bertram.

Friedman acknowledges the people and places behind the book, a list of characters, a chronology of events, a glossary, a bibliography listing other books on the resistance in Germany, and an index. All together, this book offers an excellent addition to a social studies curriculum.



# Social Sensitivity

The author shows compassion for the people dealing with war and persecution.

She shows the true-life attitudes of families, friends, and neighbors as they deal with the audacities of war: from aiding and rescuing the persecuted to joining in the Hitler movement.

The author aids young adults in their search for the truth. She creates a list of characters and a chronology, as well as additional sources on Nazi resistance, a glossary, and a table of contents.

Friedman shows compassion for young adults. She communicates an honest story about a series of events that affected thousands of people and many cultures. The ethical issues raised can certainly be applied today. How do young adults right a wrong? How do they stand up for what they believe? Can they effectively deal with peer pressure and maintain self-esteem?

How do they handle divorce and death?

When they feel strongly about something, how do they express it?

The concepts of hope, perseverance, and integrity prevail during this story about a remarkable young woman who resists the Nazis to help others, even though it means her death. As a result, Cato dies with honor, integrity, and a spiritual peace.

# Literary Qualities

Friedman employs a plain writing style by using simple sentences with clear and direct statements. She narrates the story in chronological order using the flashback technique. Her realism depicts the political upheaval of the time and the desperate measures people used in responding to it.

This book offers a great insight into the complexity of one family that lived, loved, and lost during Hitler's regime. It helps young adults understand this tumultuous time in history.





# Themes and Characters

Friedman employs the third person point of view in depicting Cato's life. She describes the Bontjes van Beeks family, Cato's childhood dreams and activities, and what led to her premature death as a Nazi resister. Universal themes of independence and creativity, divorce, peer pressure, death, integrity, and love emerge.

Friedman selected the title, *Flying against the Wind*, because it exemplifies Cato's nature. As a young child, readers share in Cato's ability to think for herself and follow her heart. This independence is what causes Cato to "fly against the wind" most of her life, which makes the biography's title an excellent choice.

Friedman develops Cato's character quickly. As a five-year-old, Cato organized the activities for her three-year-old sister, Mietje, and her six-year-old cousin, Marianne.

Cato did not concern herself with appearance. Artistic, bright, and eager to learn, she became the best athlete in the two-room school she attended. She loved reading and music.

Cato matures emotionally as the Hitler regime increases restrictions on young people. To her dismay, Cato is required to make difficult decisions that confront the status quo. This develops the universal theme of independence. For instance, Cato does not join the Hitler Youth that promises fun activities and an extra day off school.

She knows that if she joins, she will no longer be free to think for herself. Instead, she endures taunts from classmates and criticism from the teacher. These experiences develop Cato's perseverance, hope, and self-reliance that take her through difficult times.

Creativity emerges as another universal theme. Olga, Cato's loving mother, studied modern dance and loved to paint. Olga grew up with five sisters in an environment that encouraged speaking out and exploring new ideas. Likewise, Olga encouraged it in the Bontjes van Beek's home, sometimes to the shock of villagers. As Hitler grew in power, it became evident that his regime did not welcome these characteristics.

Olga married Jan Bontjes van Beek. Jan, born in Holland, immigrated to Germany with his father. At age twelve, Jan could play eight musical instruments, sing, dance, and draw. Cato's creativity and independence came as much from her father as it did from her mother's side of the family.

Jan, a ceramist, announced to Olga that he wanted to pursue his career in Berlin.

Olga refused to move from Fischerhude.

Cato was twelve years old when Jan left and filed for divorce. Jan remarried Rali, and Cato learned to deal with a stepmother.



Cato matured and eventually accepted her father's new marriage and wife, realizing that she could not control or dream away things that she wished were otherwise.

Friedman highlights important political facts that shaped Cato's world. For example, she mentions that Hitler joined the National Socialist German Workers Party and started the Nazi movement. Often referred to by the initials S.S., Storm Troopers—Hitler's private police force—brutally interrupted political meetings and took over Germany. She includes relevant details, like the abolishment of the Weimar Republic that eliminated free speech and the right of assembly. She discloses how this chaotic time impacts Cato and her family.

Suddenly, a family that encouraged free speech had to censor everything they said.

They could not repeat conversations that took place at home. Publicly, they talked about crops, weather, and a neighbor's health.

Readers experience how Hitler's laws changed the school setting. The regime banned books and enlisted children in the Hitler's youth program. When Cato and her friends did not participate, children called them heathens. It is during this painful time that Cato's grandmother died. Facing death and peer pressure, Cato explored Christianity because of its belief in an afterlife. This commitment to religion stayed with her and comforted her in imprisonment and death.

The author shows how the political climate divided families. Cato's cousin Ulrich Modersohn avidly supported Hitler and his principals. He believed that Hitler's ways were good for the state. Although Ulrich's family argued bitterly with him to change his thinking, at age twenty-one, he became a Storm Trooper.

As a teenager, Cato traveled to GreteWynchcombe, a tiny village in England, where she served as a mother's helper.

There, she met slim, red-haired, over sixfeet-tall John, who soon became her first boyfriend. John and Cato attended movies, rode bicycles to the tennis courts, or walked to dances in the local hall. So deep became their love, that upon Cato's return to Germany, they promised to keep in touch.

Hitler's escalation of oppression eventually made visits with John less frequent.

Cato accepted an invitation from her father, Jan, and his wife Rali, to stay with them in Berlin to attend finishing school. The freedom from the oppressive small town allowed Cato to be a teenager with few cares.

She dated medical students, young soldiers on leave, and junior officials at the Foreign Ministry. She attended theaters, music halls, and learned to fly.

Cato experienced romance with other men, although John remained her favorite.



She wrote to John daily as she dreamed of returning to England to marry him. Friedman shows the magic of young love and its excitement, without degrading it through sexual overtures.

Horrified by political events, a maturing Cato involved herself in resistance movements. She joined a group who rescued Jews, aided prisoners, and helped opponents of the regime. That is where she met Hannes, who tried unsuccessfully to win Cato's affection.

Eventually Cato befriended Heinz Strelow, a journalist and soldier. Through her relationship with him, her opposition efforts intensified. This led her to unknowingly join the Red Orchestra, a Russian Spy Ring operating for the Soviets. As her relationship with Heinz grew, she hoped to marry him. It was this relationship, coupled with Cato's naivety, that led to her arrest and conviction for treason.

In prison, Cato befriended an S.S. soldier, Helmut. Fed up with Hitler, Helmut disagreed with Cato's sentence. Arranging for her escape and hiding until war's end, he presented the plan to Cato.

Cato refused to abandon her group, also convicted of treason and sentenced to execution. Her sense of integrity compelled her to decline the escape. Despite several appeals and a hope that Germany would overturn the judgment of treason, Hitler's regime executed Cato at twenty-two years of age on August 5, 1943.

Family love, a universal theme, plays an extensive role in Cato's life. She confided in Olga, Mietje, and Tim. Their love engulfed her when in isolation, and seemed to resonate in her heart in any situation. In her closing hours, Cato wrote in her final letters to her family how much their unending love protected and nurtured her as she peacefully approached her death.

Friedman shows young adults that they can have passion in their beliefs and nurture integrity despite adverse consequences.

# Topics for Discussion

1. Characterize Cato's personality. What worked in her life? What got her into trouble and why?
2. Do you agree with Cato's decision to avoid an escape from prison and face execution? Speculate what might have happened if Cato escaped.
3. After you read *Flying against the Wind*, compare and contrast Cato's family with your family using a Venn diagram.
4. Characterize the impact that Olga had throughout Cato's life.
5. What impact did Jan, Cato's father, have on her life?
6. Describe Cato's relationship with her stepmother, Rali. What positive influence did Rali have on Cato?
7. Characterize Ulrich, Cato's older cousin.

What role did he play in the family? Do you have anyone in your family who takes an opposite stand on issues? How does your family handle it?

8. Compare and contrast the men who loved Cato throughout her life: John Hall, Hannes Lange, Heinz Strelow, and Helmut Nievert. What characteristics did they share?
9. Analyze how Cato matures while she is a mother's helper for the Beesleys of Grete-Wynchcombe, England.
10. Describe the events that led Cato to seek Christianity. Why did she choose Christianity instead of another religion? How did her family respond?



# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research Berlin's disreputable Alexanderplatz Prison. What makes it notorious?

How does it shape Alexanderplatz?

Describe the history of Alexanderplatz.

2. Research how to create a biography.

What characteristics would you look for in a person? How would you gather information? How would you create a timeline?

3. Research Adolf Hitler. Describe his family life, religion, and political career.

What experiences shaped him into the man he became? How did he rise in power and eventually fall?

4. It takes a network of people to allow a government to thrive, even the reign of Hitler. What attitudes in Germany supported Hitler's hate and racial inequity?

5. Research the Red Orchestra, the Russian Spy Ring. Describe its mission, purpose, and key leaders. Did it succeed?

6. Describe the United States' role in Hitler's time. What was the U.S. foreign policy?

7. The Bontjes Van Beeks celebrated creativity, particularly art and music. Compare and contrast the art and music of the 1920s to the mid-1940s in Germany.

8. Fischerhude, the hometown of Cato, lies in the northern German Lowlands.

Describe Fischerhude, its history and attributes. What business supported the village?

9. Cato admired Amelia Earhart and Hans Bertram, airplane flyers. Describe in detail the planes they flew. What made each flyer a notable figure of the time?

## For Further Reference

"Friedman, Ina R." In *Contemporary Authors*, vols. 53-56. Detroit: Gale, 1975. This entry provides a short biographical article about the author.

"Friedman, Ina R." In *Something about the Author*, vol. 49. Detroit: Gale, 1987. This entry discusses the author's life and works.

## Related Titles/Adaptations

World War II and the Nazi period had a profound impact on the world. The ethical questions posed then are relevant today.

Friedman has three books for young adults on this era: *Escape or Die*, *The Other Victims*, and *Flying against the Wind*. She explores the personal stories of Jews and Christians under twenty years old. These young adults, endangered by the Nazis, made profoundly difficult moral choices.

Friedman's first book, *Escape or Die: True Stories of Young People Who Survived the Holocaust*, was published in 1985. She continued researching World War II Germany for her second book, a collective biography, *The Other Victims: First-Person Stories of NonJews Persecuted by the Nazis*. The research from this book spawned the third book *Flying against the Wind: The Story of a Young Woman Who Defied the Nazis*.

In 2001, Friedman wrote, produced, and performed her biographical work *Escape or Die: True Stories of Young People Who Survived the Holocaust* for videotape. Designed for grades six to adult, its running time is forty-five minutes.



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