



Lily Renée, Detail of *Senorita Rio*, *Fight Comics* 47, Fiction House, New York, December 1946, cover

Lily Renée: From Refugee to Renown

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Lily Renée Willheim Phillips¹—born in Vienna, Austria, on May 12, 1921—was a talented Jewish teenager when she had to flee the Nazis, found her way to America, and, at 21, wound up as a comic book illustrator, doing something with which she had no experience, but something that had everything to do with her life: an opportunity to fight back at the Nazis.

On March 12, 1938, the Nazi army marched into Austria. They were greeted by cheering Austrians waving Nazi flags, throwing flowers, and giving Nazi salutes. But not everyone was so enthusiastic. The Austrian Jews knew about Germany's history of active anti-Semitism since Hitler had come into power in 1933. Anti-Jewish rules

excluded Jews from German society; they were not allowed to hold government jobs, own property, or run businesses. In 1935, the Nuremberg laws decreed that only “Aryans” could be German citizens.



Fig. 1 Lily Renée with her parents in Vienna, ca. 1928. Lily Renée collection © Lily Renée

Among those Austrian Jews was the Willheim family, well to do Jews living in Vienna [Fig. 1]. Rudolf Willheim was the director of the Holland America steamship line. Along with their daughter, Lily Renée, they had attended opera and ballet. In 1938, at seventeen, Lily was a talented teenager whose art had already been exhibited in a gallery [Fig. 2]. With the arrival of the Nazis, however, their lives immediately changed. The Nazis confiscated Jewish property. They took the Willheim’s radio, effectively cutting off the family’s ability to find out what was going on in the rest of the world. The family was forced to share their apartment with other Jewish families. They arrested



Lily’s uncle, sent him to Dachau, and let him out again when he promised to go to Israel, but a month later they rearrested him, and this time sent him to Buchenwald, where he died. Lily lost her Aryan friends, who were forbidden to see her. Two angry women tried to tear off her dirndl skirt, which she had made herself, shouting that it was a German fashion and Jews had no right to wear it.²

Fig. 2 Lily Willheim (Renée), childhood artwork, n.d. Gouache and ink over graphite on paper. Lily Renée Collection © Lily Renée

On November 9th and 10th, 1938, anti-Semitic mobs led by the Gestapo rioted in Berlin and Vienna, breaking the windows of Jewish-owned businesses, beating and arresting Jews, and burning synagogues. This was the November pogrom known as *Kristallnacht*, the Night of Broken Glass. On December 2, 1938, Britain and Germany made an agreement, permitting Jewish children under seventeen from German-occupied countries to come to Britain if they could find sponsors. Lily, not yet seventeen, qualified. Sponsored by the parents of her British pen pal, she left her parents and boarded a train with other Jewish children to take her first to Holland, then across the channel to Liverpool, and on to Horsforth, a suburb of Leeds, where she was met by her pen pal, Molly Kealy, and Molly's mother [Fig. 3].



Lily had learned English in school, but the English spoken by Molly, her mother, and the people of Leeds bore almost no resemblance to what she had learned. She found herself confused and alone, a stranger in a strange land. Unfortunately, she discovered, Mrs. Kealy expected her to be an unpaid housemaid. When Lily, whose family had always had servants to do the housework, failed miserably at housekeeping, Mrs. Kealy took revenge by starving her. She would send Lily out on errands and eat lunch while she was gone. Lily survived on high teas.

Fig. 3 Lily Willheim (Renée), Passport Photo, 1939.
Lily Renée collection © Lily Renée

Lily visited well-to-do families, trying to convince them to hire her parents as servants, so that they could come to England and safety, but it didn't work. Finally, when England declared war on Germany on September 3, 1939, she lost touch with her family completely. Stuck with Lily, Mrs. Kealy grew meaner and Lily grew angrier. Finally, one day Mrs. Kealy exclaimed, "You don't even know if your parents are still alive!" That was the last straw for Lily; she left the house that night. Without money for the bus, she walked to downtown Leeds and went to an employment agency, where she found work as a mother's helper.

Unbeknown to Lily, her parents had escaped to America, and had been searching for her. They finally found her, thanks to the Jewish Refugee Agency at Bloomsbury House in London, the central office for Jewish refugees. Fearing she'd be sent to an internment camp, Lily tried to escape. She phoned her cousin, who worked as a maid in London, and arranged to meet her in Victoria Station. But when she got to the station, there was no cousin, only a strange man who told her he'd been sent by the cousin.

Faced with nowhere else to go, a frightened Lily followed the stranger to a closed school. There she was admitted by a teacher, who was living in the school since all the students had been evacuated to the countryside. The teacher put her up for the night and convinced her to turn herself into the police the next morning.

Lily spent the next night in a prison cell, not under arrest but because there was no place else to put her. In the morning she was visited by yet another Scotland Yard inspector, this one bearing the good news that the *Georgic* from Liverpool was waiting to take her to America that night.

Lily reached New York on February 11, 1940, but life there was still far from perfect. The family had lost everything to the Nazis and were penniless, crowded into a tenement building on East Seventy-second Street along with other refugees. Her mother, Else, had been kicked in the stomach by a Gestapo officer while still living in Vienna, and she needed an operation. Rudolf Willheim had found work as an elevator operator but had hurt his hand and was unable to work. Later he became an accountant. Else crocheted dresses, and Lily painted Tyrolean designs on small wooden boxes, drew for Woolworth's catalogues at fifty cents an hour, and did some fashion modeling [Fig. 4]. She was so poor that during lunch breaks she would go to Horn & Hardart, pour herself a glass of water, squeeze a lemon slice into it, and add sugar: free lemonade.³



Fig. 4 Lily Willheim (Renée), *Box Design*, New York, 1940s. Lily Renée collection © Lily Renée

One day in 1942 Else saw an ad in the paper: a New York comic book publisher, Fiction House, was looking for cartoonists. Fiction House had begun as a pulp magazine publisher in 1921. By 1938, they expanded to comic books, the first series being Jumbo Comics, starring Sheena, Queen of the Jungle, who became their most famous character. By the early 1940s they had added five new series titles, most with a specific theme. Thus, *Planet Comics* was their science fiction title, *Wings* had an aviation theme, *Jungle* was, well, jungle stories, and *Fight* and *Rangers* had multiple themes. The comic books were unusual in that they often featured female heroes: aviatrixes, jungle girls, beautiful girl detectives, and spies. The female heroes were in control and didn't need men to save them. They were also very pinuppy and leggy, with skirts flashing above the knees, though quite tame by today's standards.

Comic books had, since their inception in the 1930s, been primarily a male bastion, their narratives shaped and their images drawn mostly by men; but it was now wartime in America, and as in every other industry, the young male artists were drafted or enlisted to fight the Germans, Italians, and Japanese. At the same time there was, if anything, an even greater demand for comics because they were avidly read by GIs. And as in every other industry, the comic book publishers hired anyone available who could draw, male or female. And when the comic book publishers began hiring women artists, Fiction House hired more women than any of the others.



Lily wasn't a comic book reader and had never drawn a comic in her life, but she had nothing to lose. She bought a couple of comic books, studied them, and drew some sample panels of Tarzan and Jane [Fig. 5]. Taking her portfolio to Fiction House, she was the only woman in a room full of hopeful male artists, but she was hired on a trial basis for eighteen dollars a week, later raised to twenty-five. The editor started her drawing backgrounds and erasing the pencil lines from the finished comic pages of other cartoonists, and she worked out, learning as she went. At the same time, she was attending art school at night at the Art Students League and the School of Visual Art.

Fig. 5 Lily Renée, *Drawing of Tarzan and Jane*, New York 1942. India ink and pencil on paper. Lily Renée collection © Lily Renée

The male artists she worked with were young and rowdy, and no one had yet heard the phrase *sexual harassment*. Sexual innuendos flew across the room and the men tried to teach her to curse in English. The writers, an older, more civilized bunch, called the male cartoonists “animals.” Lily was miserable and cried herself to sleep many nights.



Fig. 6 Lily Renée, *Jane Martin*, Wings Comics 34, Fiction House, New York, 1943, 41



Fig. 7 Lily Renée, *Jane Martin*, Wings Comics 35, Fiction House, New York, 1943

But in her first series, “Jane Martin,” which ran in *Wings Comics*, the flying-nurse heroine has no problem dressing like a gypsy and singing to a roomful of Nazis, then freeing captured American flyers, or disguising herself as a cancan dancer in an occupied Paris café. The character was braver than her artist. Lily obviously related to her heroine, and now, through Jane Martin, she was fighting back against the Nazis!

Lily’s art is somewhat crude in her early stories; she is improving as she goes. Some panels are obviously copied from magazine photos or illustrations, but at other times, particularly when she has the luxury of space in splash panels, Lily’s art shines.

The Fiction House art style was, in general, livelier than was typical in the comic book style of the times, which tended to fall into a simple grid pattern with an average of six evenly divided panels. At Fiction House, artists used decorative splash panels and more creative panel layouts, which suited Lily perfectly. In *Wings* #34, 1943, she decorates the borders of her splash panel with dragons and decorative pagodas [Fig. 6]. But she shows her lack of experience later in the story when, supposedly in Mongolia, she dresses a character called Madame Zu in full Japanese geisha regalia. Perhaps she had simply not had the time to do the proper research. Again, in the next issue of *Wings Comics*, Lily produces a gorgeous splash panel: lit by the flames of their burning house and fields, a peasant family weeps. But a boy in the foreground defiantly waves a flag, the French *tricolore*. This could easily be a war poster: the people suffer, but they don’t give up; they will fight on [Fig. 7].

By the mid-1940s, another woman artist finally came to work at Fiction House and Lily was no longer alone in a roomful of men. Fran Hopper, an art student, thought working at Fiction House would just be a summer job, but she stayed, and she and Lily became best friends. Soon other women artists, Marcia Snyder and Ruth Atkinson, arrived at Fiction House. Although the comic book publishers were finally hiring women, there were still far more male cartoonists than female, and Lily, who often signed her work “L. Renée,” received fan mail addressed to “Mr. L. Renée” [Fig. 8].



Fig. 8 Lily Renée at work at Fiction House, New York, 1940s. Lily Renée collection © Lily Renée



Fran Hopper took over the “Jane Martin” series and Lily moved on to draw “The Werewolf Hunter” for *Rangers Comics*. She took on “Werewolf Hunter” because none of the other artists wanted to draw it; they, and Lily too, didn’t want to draw wolves in every issue. But working with the writer, Lily changed it from constant werewolves into a dark fantasy series, a perfect venue for her style, heavily influenced by German Expressionism and the Viennese *Jugendstil*. It is with the long-lasting “Werewolf Hunter” that Lily comes into her own. “The Werewolf Hunter” stories were credited to Armand Broussard, but that was a fictional name. Lily does not remember the name of her writer. In the stories, Armand Broussard is the name of a professor who specializes in traveling all over the world, examining supernatural occurrences.

Fig. 9 Lily Renée, *The Werewolf Hunter*, *Rangers Comics* 37, Fiction House, New York, October 1947

Back in Vienna during Lily's childhood, her opera-loving father used to take her to see operas, and she would attend ballets with her classmates. She remembers loving the ballets and operas because she was more fascinated by the costumes than by the music and dance. When she came to New York, Lily had hoped to find work as a costume designer for stage shows and ballet and opera. She shows that love of costume in her Werewolf Hunter stories. In one, she arranges her page so that the panels point to a large, centered circle, in which frolicking manikins costumed in flowers resemble the Tyrolean boxes she had painted when she first arrived in America [Fig. 11]. On another page, a beautiful but terrified woman, clad in revealing beads and transparent harem pants, emerges from a gaily patterned rug.

But where Lily really excelled was with "Señorita Rio," the character for which she is most known, whose adventures appeared in *Fight Comics*. Señorita Rio was a perfect fantasy for shy Lily, who could not afford the beautiful costumes she drew. Señorita Rio was Rita Farrar, a Brazilian film star and nightclub entertainer who worked as a spy for the Secret Service, ferreting out Fascists, Falangists, and Nazis in Brazil and various fictional Latin American countries with names like El Greco and San Salo. In an industry and time where the male comic artists generally costumed their heroines in featureless short red dresses, Rio, as drawn by Lily, was definitely the chicest spy in comics. In an interview with me, Lily said, "And I just wanted to say with all those comic strips and also the name 'Señorita Rio,' it's sort of a fantasy. Señorita Rio got clothes that I couldn't have, you know. She had a leopard coat and she wore these high-end shoes and all this and had adventures and was very daring and sexy and glamorous and all of that." In fact, Señorita Rio bore a strong resemblance to her artist, though she may not have been aware of it, with her dark hair and sultry good looks.

Lily's "Señorita Rio" front pages were all small masterpieces of design [Fig. 12]. They usually consisted of an almost full-page decorative splash panel featuring Rio, gun in hand, in action, and below, one or two smaller panels that began the story. The interior story pages continued the clever sort of panel layouts that she used in "Werewolf Hunter." They tended to include at least one larger panel highlighting Rio in one of her many stylish outfits. While Jane Martin had worn some amazing clothes, including a dragon-embroidered *chiong sam* and a Parisian cancan outfit, Lily really went to town dressing Señorita Rio. She clothed her heroine in colorful dresses reminiscent of then-popular Brazilian singing and dancing star Carmen Miranda. In one famous cover, she draws Rio, in her off-the-shoulder peasant blouse and Carmen Miranda skirt, engaged in a duel with the villain on a tiled rooftop, while the man she is rescuing clings to the roof by his fingernails. But Lily also dressed Rio in revealing nightclub costumes and high fashion suits, and even, despite the tropical South American weather, coveted leopard-skin coats [Fig. 13].

And of course: the Nazis. Sometimes they were simply called Fascists, or even Falangists. As late as 1947, Rio was still fighting Nazis in Latin America. As one story says, "The Nazi war is over, but the struggle for a Fourth Reich begins."

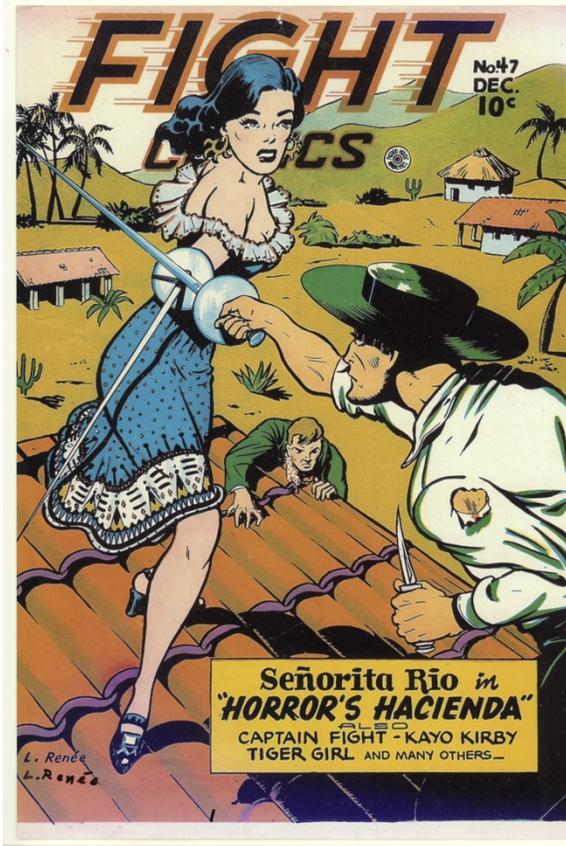


Fig. 12 Lily Renée, *Señorita Rio*, *Fight Comics* 47, Fiction House, New York, December 1946, cover



Fig. 13 Lily Renée, *Señorita Rio*, *Fight Comics* 50, Fiction House, New York, June 1947, cover

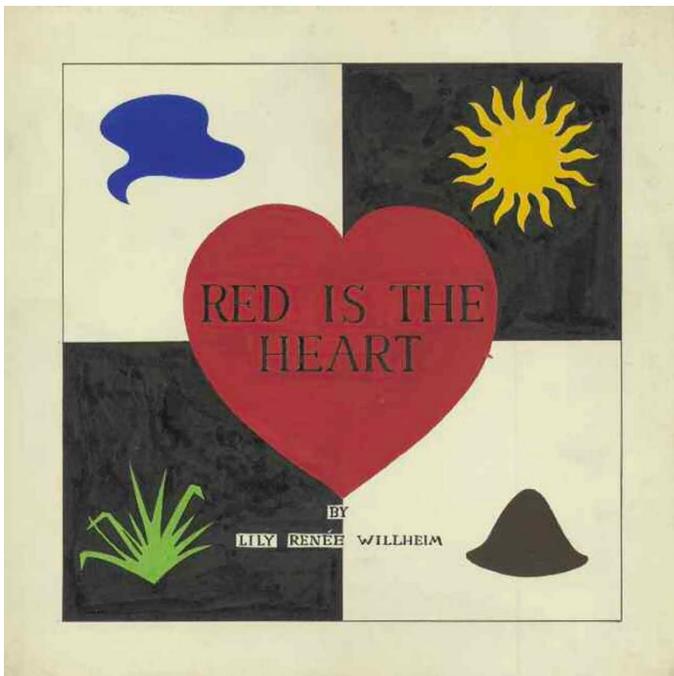
The Nazis kidnap and imprison rightful rulers in their attempts to take over small countries, they rig elections so that the Fascist candidate will win, and Rio must stop them. In another story, Nazis hire an actor to impersonate Hitler as they attempt to sell forged Hitler paintings to a rich but naïve millionairess. Rio usually gets captured and often tortured, but she still manages to wisecrack. Strung up by her thumbs, she mutters, “I forgot to tell you. I can’t talk much without using my thumbs.” And she always manages to escape. In the end, Lily, as Rio, gleefully destroys the Nazis [Fig. 14].

When it comes to killing Nazis, Lily’s fourth series, “The Lost World,” takes the cake. The premise of “The Lost World” is that in the year 1975(!), Earth was invaded by beings from the planet Volta, and all the humans were destroyed. Well, not all the humans. At first, the only survivors are the hero, Hunt Bowman, who uses a bow and arrow (hence his name) to hunt and destroy the evil Voltamen; his fetchingly ragged companion Lyssa (but she wears high heeled shoes with her rags!); and their big dog, Lobo, who only growls at Voltamen. However, as the series progresses, they travel all over the planet, where they meet and join with other survivors [Fig. 15].

“The Lost World” stories carry an anti-disarmament message. In Washington D.C., Hunt and Lyssa approach the ruined Capitol building. Hunt says, “I’ll show you something inside . . . it will make you feel very sad . . . and very proud!” It is the Declaration of Independence. Hunt asks, “But if we were the greatest nation on Earth how did the Voltamen conquer?” And Lyssa replies, “After the last of the great wars we destroyed our weapons . . .” And in another story, Hunt and Lyssa enter a ruined building. Lyssa asks, “What is this place?” Hunt answers, “Long years ago when Earth was composed of various countries, they banded together in what they called the United Nations. They had solved their problems—and then Volta invaded.” As he speaks they enter a room where they find a long table, and still seated at it are skeletons, with the papers they had been debating when the alien invasion occurred.

“The Lost World” was another series on which Lily worked with the writer, and the Voltamen story was written after the war, but the message is clear: don’t dismantle your weapons, remain alert. The Nazis could come back at any time.

After she stopped drawing for Fiction House, Lily and her then-husband, artist Eric Peters, who was also an Austrian refugee, collaborated on *Elsie the Borden Cow Comics* and *Abbot and Costello Comics* for the publisher St. John. She also drew romance comics and a teen-girl comic called *Kathy*, for St. John’s publications. As would be expected from comic books about teenage girls and a famous movie comedy team, this group, though beautifully drawn, was written with lightweight humor. Nazis were no longer featured in her work.



Lily also wrote. She wrote and drew a children’s book called *Red is the Heart* [Fig. 16], and wrote plays, one of which, *Dial God*, was performed in a small venue, the Little Theater of Hunter College. One of her plays was the last time she wrote about Nazis. It was called *Superman in Sleep’s Embrace*, a black comedy about Hitler having a nightmare.

Fig. 16 Cover of Lily Renée Willheim, *Red is the Heart* (*Rot ist das Herz*), bilingual edition, German translation by Michael Freund (Vienna, Austria: Jewish Museum Vienna, 2019)

For a long time, Lily, understandably, did not want to return to Vienna and when she did return once, she pretended that she didn't speak German. But in 2018, she received the Decoration of Honor in Gold for services to the Republic of Austria by the Austrian Consulate General New York,⁴ and finally, in May 2019, she returned to Vienna to be honored at the Jewish Museum Vienna in the exhibition, *Three with a Pen: Lily Renée, Bil Spira and Paul Peter Porges*.⁵ The three illustrators and cartoonists had all been forced to flee the Nazis in the late 1930s and found fame and fortune in the countries that had welcomed and sheltered them. *Three with a Pen* moved to The Austrian Cultural Forum in New York in 2021.⁶ For the exhibition in Vienna, the Jewish Museum published her children's book, *Red is the Heart*,⁷ and this time Lily, by then 98 years old and the only one of the three artists still living, returned in triumph to the city that had once wanted to kill her.



Portrait photo Lily Renée, New York, ca. 2019. Still frame of "Lily," filmed by Dan Brohawn

1. Lily's long-lasting third marriage, in 1953, was to Randolph G. Phillips, a financial consultant who was active with the American Civil Liberties Union and other political causes. Their daughter, Nina, was born in 1954, and their son, Richard, was born in 1960. See Randolph G. Phillips' obituary in *The New York Times*: <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/10/12/obituaries/randolph-g-phillips-71-dies-led-many-stockholder-fights.html>.
2. This and subsequent anecdotes come from conversations between the author and Lily Renée.
3. Horn & Hardart, founded in 1888 as a coffee shop, introduced the first food-service automats in the United States in 1902.
4. "Austrian Foreign Minister Karin Kneissl at UN General Assembly," New and Events, Austrian Embassy (website), Washington, DC, September 23–29, 2018, <https://www.austria.org/the-latest/2018/10/2/kneissl-unga-2018>; Austrian Consulate General New York, Facebook, December 19, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/313514378664/posts/10156821456228665/>.
5. The exhibition *Die drei mit dem Stift: Lily Renée, Bil Spira und Paul Peter Porges (Three with a Pen)* was held at the Jewish Museum Vienna, Austria, from May 8 to November 17, 2019. A description is archived at <https://www.jmw.at/en/exhibitions>. See also *Die drei mit dem Stift: Lily Renée, Bil Spira und Paul Peter Porges (Three with a Pen: Lily Renée, Bil Spira und Paul Peter Porges)* bilingual exhibition catalogue (Vienna, AU: Jewish Museum Vienna, 2019).
6. The Austrian Cultural Forum, New York, NY, exhibited *Three with a Pen: Lily Renée, Bil Spira and Paul Peter Porges* from March 11 to September 3, 2021, <https://acfny.org/exhibition/three-with-a-pen/>.
7. Lily Renée Willheim, *Red is the Heart (Rot ist das Herz)* (Vienna, AU: Jewish Museum Vienna, 2019), bilingual edition, German translation by Michael Freund.

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