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DIAMOND ANNIVERSARY

# Dressed For Success

Local woman launches dress business in Kenya.

Page 8.







# Life, Death



# And Fashion

A collection of designs by a fashion designer in war-torn Prague makes its mark almost 80 years later.

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**E**ight fashion drawings, rendered in color long ago by designer Hedvika (Hedy) Strnad, were transformed into striking, fully sewn outfits in 2013. The work was painstaking, taking 10 months as seamstresses completed an evening gown, two coats, two suits and a few daytime dresses, all fresh, elegant and urbane.

The seamstresses — unable to consult with the designer on fabrics, pleats and other details — relied on the drawings as the only tangible legacy the designer had left, and the circumstances surrounding them uncovered a story that many felt compelled to tell.

In a letter dated Dec. 11, 1939, Paul Strnad, Hedy's banker husband, wrote a letter from his home in Prague to his cousin Alvin in Milwaukee. Stamped with Nazi censor clearance, the letter told that the Germans had just invaded Czechoslovakia and the couple had lost their jobs. Paul wrote that Hedy was a very talented dress designer in the hopes that Alvin could find her a job in Milwaukee and the pair could receive affidavits to get out of Czechoslovakia; he included a copy of the designs with the letter.

Alvin was unable to secure a visa for his cousins, likely because of the strict quota the U.S. enforced. Before receiving a response, Paul and Hedy were sent to Theresienstadt then on to the Warsaw ghetto; they are believed to have perished there or at Treblinka, when they were about 40 years old.

The story of Hedy and Paul is expressed in detail as the fashions — displayed on mannequins in lifelike runway poses — are joined by letters, murals and a video presentation, all on view through Dec. 29 at the Holocaust Memorial Center in Farmington Hills.

The exhibit, *Stitching History From the Holocaust*, is on loan from the Jewish Museum Milwaukee (JMM), established in the city where relatives of the couple had moved. The full display was developed after Burton Strnad, Alvin's son, found Paul's letter with Hedy's sketches in his mother's home when she moved.

"The exhibit personalizes history and gives us a way to reflect on the Czech Jewish experience, which I don't think we do very often," says Ellie Gettinger, education director at the JMM. "In Czechoslovakia, Jews were a very secularized and assimilated population.

"Generally, when we study the Holocaust, we focus on the mass scale of it with Germany and Poland tending to be the geographical touchpoints. This exhibit gives an expanding sense of vision into the Holocaust geographically."

Long before there was a JMM, Burton Strnad donated his findings to the Milwaukee Jewish Historical Society in 1997. After the museum was opened in 2008 and the materials were being shown, a visitor suggested that the intent of the sketches should be realized by sewing the elegant clothing that was planned. Administrators, impressed with the idea, contracted costumers from the Milwaukee Repertory Theater.

"Seamstresses went above and beyond their initial contract," Gettinger says. "Jessica Yaeger, the lead person on the project, is a fabulous costumer and sewer, and her particular passion is for 1940s fashion. She is a USO [United Service Organizations] reenactor and collects these sorts of fashions.

"The sewers had to do extensive research because they didn't see the backs of the dresses in the sketches. They went to costume archives, found patterns online and looked through old magazines. All the zippers are vintage, and the fabric is silk-screened so it's an exact match for what is in the pictures."

While visitors are asked not to touch the outfits, they



**FACING PAGE:** A room of the exhibit; Hedy Strnad's eight sketches, including a gray evening gown accented with faux crimson flowers. **THIS PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM:** Hedy and Paul Strnad. The back of the envelope that carried Paul's plea. Fryda Fleish and her granddaughters Allison Gold and Dayna Elrom.

are invited to feel swatches of the fabrics arranged on a display table. Also on view is a sewing machine reminiscent of the times.

Additional research to go beyond the dresses included the use of the Yad Vashem database and contacts with a niece, Brigitte Neumann Rohaczek, who was saved through Kindertransport operations and lives in Europe.

It was learned that Hedy ran a dress shop and supervised a staff of dressmakers.

"There were hundreds of dressmaking shops like hers in Prague," Gettinger says. "Many of them were staffed by Jews. We hope, one day, to find the location of Hedy's shop."

Among the display items is a family tree diagram to point out the relationship of the Prague Strnads and the Milwaukee Strnads. There also are wall murals of enlarged family photos taken in Europe.

A catalog and teacher's guide can be accessed on the exhibit's website, [stitchinghistory.org](http://stitchinghistory.org). The catalog includes seven essays from scholars exploring different elements of the story, from the Czech Jewish experience to fashion history.

First shown in Milwaukee in 2014, the exhibit has traveled to Madison, New York and Miami and eventually will be on permanent view in the city where it was developed. About 10,000 people saw the display at the JMM.

"I'm excited to have new and different elements come out of the traveling exhibit," Gettinger says. "In Madison, design-school students created dresses inspired by Hedy. In Florida, there was a one-act play imagining dialogue between Hedy and Paul as they were trying to escape Czechoslovakia."

Michigan will have a more realistic element as display cases present the story of a local woman who survived because of her dressmaking skills. Fryda Bester Fleish, of Oak Park, was forced into labor at a German factory in the Sudetenland, where flax was made into thread.

Family photos, including those taken in a return trip to the area, are part of that display.

Fleish, nearing 90, and her daughter, Esther Gold of Farmington Hills, both volunteer at the Holocaust Memorial Center. Fleish has helped in the gift shop, and Gold gives time to the library.

Gold is proud that her mother, liberated by the Russians, now uses needlework skills to benefit the Jewish community. She knits hats and lap blankets for Hadassah projects.

"Docents will give a sense of the broad history of the Strnads and give a sense of the people and talent lost because of the Holocaust," Gettinger says. "Hedy and her husband were people with connections and should have been able to immigrate. They had [resources for] financial security and sponsors in America.

"We've had so many people say this story is like the experiences of a [relative], and we're glad to know that a woman active in Michigan was able to survive because of her skills as a dressmaker." 🌸

## details

*Stitching History From the Holocaust* will be on view through Dec. 29 at the Holocaust Memorial Center in Farmington Hills. \$5-\$8; free for uniform service personnel. Docent-led tours are scheduled for 1:30 p.m. Sundays, July 23 and Aug. 13, and 7 p.m. Monday, Aug. 28. For information on the local programming, call (248) 553-2400 or visit [holocaustcenter.org](http://holocaustcenter.org). For information on the exhibit and the catalog, go to [stitchinghistory.org](http://stitchinghistory.org).