WEEKEND

Lost to the Holocaust

Hedvika “Hedy” Strnad’s dresses were assembled with historic accuracy by the Costume Shop of the Milwaukee Repertory Theater.

Photos by the Jewish Museum Milwaukee
A never-before-assembled Memorial Center dress exhibit highlights possibilities cut short

BY GREG TASKER
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The agate blue, purple, white floral and other stylish dresses on display look they could have been inspired by the pages of a 1950s fashion magazine.

The eight dresses and accessories were sketched several decades ago by Hedvika "Hedy" Strnad, but never sewn together until recently Strnad, a Prague dressmaker, partnered along with her husband, Paul, during the Holocaust.

Their story and Hedy's recreated dresses are the focus of a special exhibit, "Stitching History from the Holocaust" at the Holocaust Memorial Center in Farmington Hills. The exhibit, on loan from the Jewish Museum in Milwaukee, explores fashion, immigration and Holocaust history through one family's eyes.

"Stitching History from the Holocaust," which opened Thursday, serves as an example of what happens when "human suffering is ignored," says Rabbi Eli Mayerfeld, CEO of the Holocaust Memorial Center. It not only serves as a reminder of human loss, but also their lost contributions to the world.

"It also is an object example of the immense loss of..."

Exhibit

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the Holocaust," Mayerfeld says. "If Paul and Hedy had been able to escape the Nazis, who knows what kind of fashion empire she could have created, providing jobs and countless articles of beautiful clothing. There's just one of many stories of what could have been, the contributions to society taken away."

The dress designs were included as part of a letter written by Paul Strnad to his cousin, Alvin, in Milwaukee in December 1939. The couple, looking to escape German-occupied Czechoslovakia, was seeking sponsorship to the United States and hoped Hedy's dressmaking skills would find her work across the Atlantic and prove they could be financially self-sufficient. The couple disappeared before they received a response.

The Strnads situation was not unusual, Mayerfeld points out. They are among countless families who sought to immigrate to the United States to escape Nazi persecution, but never succeeded. They were seeking refuge in a country in the depths of the Great Depression, with a popular fear of new-comers taking jobs. The U.S. had tight restrictions on immigrants and refugees in place and, Mayerfeld notes, rejected countless applications.

"Each of these people who were turned away could have represented new innovations, new economic opportunities," Mayerfeld notes. "It's very important to ask these, 'What if' questions. We want people to think about these things. What happens when all these people are turned away? What's the impact on the United States of America?"

The Strnads story was almost a forgotten page of Holocaust history until Alvin's son, Burton, and his family discovered Paul's letter and a packet containing the dress designs while cleaning out his mother's basement in 1997. He donated his findings to the Milwaukee Jewish Historical Society, which later became the Jewish Museum Milwaukee.

When the museum opened, curators put the sketches and letter on display and, thanks to a visitor's suggestion, created and

See more: View a photo gallery of the exhibit at detroitnews.com/entertainment.

premiered an exhibit in 2014. Hedy's dresses and accessories were meticulously created with historic accuracy by the Costume Shop of the Milwaukee Repertory Theater. In the exhibit, the dresses adorn mannequins standing before blown-up historic photographs of Paris, Prague and Germany.

Copies of Hedy's original sketches also are on display, along with reproductions of the letter and envelope the Strnads sent to Milwaukee. A touch screen allows students to touch the materials used to make the dresses and accessories, and a family tree shows how many members died during the Holocaust.

"You understand (the Strnads) as people. You really get a sense of who they were and you feel like you get to know them as you go through the exhibit," said Sarah Saltzman, events manager for the Holocaust Memorial Center. "Paris was the center of fashion at the time. It makes you wonder what we could have gained by having her come here and do her designs in America.

"Stitching History from the Holocaust" was also exhibited in New York; Madison, Wisconsin; and Miami Beach, Florida.

It's uncertain how Paul and Hedy Strnad died during the Holocaust. Their nephew, who submitted documentation to Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum and archives in Jerusalem, reported the couple was transported from Prague to a transit camp and eventually deported to either Auschwitz or Treblinka, both in Poland. There is no death record.

Telling the stories of lost individuals and families is important in understanding the Holocaust, Mayerfeld says.

"(Individual stories) are really important for telling the story of the Holocaust," Mayerfeld says. "The story highlights of two people who were murdered in the Holocaust helps people connect to what otherwise is an overwhelming observation of a terrible event in history that they can't imagine the enormity of it."

GregTasker is a Michigan-based freelance writer.