‘We know their story’

HMC exhibit showcases dresses, designs

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She was robbed of her ending, but that didn’t stop her story from being told at museums throughout the country.

Dressmaker Hedwig Antschel Strnad — Hedy for short — perished in a Warsaw ghetto in April 1942 at around age 44.

“There were 6 million Jews killed during this time, and you have to think that this is one story,” Ann Kliman, a

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ABOVE AND RIGHT: Dresses are pictured on display at the Holocaust Memorial Center June 23.

LEFT: This evening gown-style, floor-length dress was designed by dressmaker Hedwig Antschel Strnad.

Photos by Donna Agusti
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Holocaust Memorial Center docent, said June 23 at the HMC. “Everyone has a journey and a story — and their recording just stopped,” she said of those who died.

A new exhibit at the Holocaust Memorial Center, “Stitching History from the Holocaust,” showcases detailed sketches of Srnad’s dresses. The exhibit opened June 23 and will be open through Dec. 29.

“That is why it is important to show this, because it represents the others’ who died in the Holocaust,” Klossman said. “And the more we can find out about different individuals, the closer to home it becomes and the more, I think, we kind of validate the experience of what was lost.”

Srnad’s sketches were found decades after she and her husband, Paul, died. In 1997, her nephew-in-law, Burton Srnad, and his family discovered Paul’s 1938 letters to his brother, Alvin Srnad, pleading with Alvin — Burton’s father — to help the couple come to America and flee Prague.

Alvin received the letters in 1939; the couple died in the Holocaust before they could receive correspondence back.

Hedy was described by her husband as a talented dressmaker, and he assured her that they would not be a burden to America.

“It was a letter he (Burton Srnad) knew nothing about,” Sarah Saltzman, of the HMC, said. “It tells the story of his uncle, who lived in Prague, desperate to get out of Czechoslovakia, and he wanted a visa to come to the United States, and so what followed were other letters.”

One letter contained eight sketches of Hedy’s work.

According to a published report, the letters were written when the Nazi conquest of Czechoslovakia was complete in March 1939.

“Stitching History from the Holocaust” serves as an example of what happens when human suffering is ignored,” Rabbi Eli Mayerfeld, CEO of the HMC, said in a press release. “It also is an abject example of the immense loss of the Holocaust. 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. Theirs is just one of many stories of what could have been, the contributions to society taken away.”

One of the letters is displayed in the exhibit.

The Milwaukee-based Jewish Historical Society-turned Jewish Museum Milwaukee put the letters on display.

“That is how the story began in Milwaukee in 1997,” Saltzman said, adding that in 2008 a museum visitor suggested that dresses should be made from Hedy’s sketches. “So they had the designs and they had the story, and nobody really knew a lot about anything else. They just had the letters, and it is of historic interest.”

Saltzman added that research was then done about the Srnads, which produced an exhibit of dresses in 2014. Research also led them to find the couple’s niece, Brigette Neu-
transported safely to orphanages in England between 1938 and 1940 before World War II, under the guidance of 29-year-old Englishman Nicholas Winton.

Nearly 670 children were saved by him; in total, there were 9,000 to 10,000 kids, primarily Jewish youth, saved.

The dresses in the exhibit were created by the costume shop of the Milwaukee Repertory Theater, according to a press release.

The vibrant dresses vary in length. Many are adorned with jackets trimmed in fur, pillbox hats, belts and shoes. The dresses would have been tailored and worn on everyday errands and special occasions.

"She could have been the next Donna Karan," Lauren Garfield-Herrin, of the Farmington Hills-based Marx Layne & Co., said at the HMC. "One thing about the dresses is (at) that time in history, it is not like you go to a store and they have (your) size... Everybody who could afford it had dressmakers."

Saltzman added that it was a "very normal thing" to have dresses tailored, because there were no readymade dresses.

"That is what you wore to work... shopping — you didn’t go shopping without your gloves or your hat."

The HMC exhibit, described as delving into the "what ifs" of the Holocaust, also features dress fabrics, a true-to-the-time sewing machine and a video of the process of creating the dresses.

Hedy also owned a store, which Rohacek remembers visiting.

"There were many Jewish people in Czechoslovakia in the industry, and they were quite known for their fashion and couture, but at the end, when the war was over, they couldn’t bring back the industry because most of those people had been murdered." Klissman said. "So it affected their economy later as well and what they were known for."

Saltzman said that a Holocaust victim could have discovered a cure for cancer, written a great novel or more.

"You just don’t know... And that is really the ultimate crime," she said, adding that the exhibit is about dresses, but a little more. "It is really an exhibit of what would have been."

For now, researchers hold fast to the fact that they are still discovering more about Hedy, like the fact that she was a redhead.

"She grows as a human," Klissman said.

"Her story becomes more enriched," Saltzman said. "This is a story of two people who we lost in the Holocaust — we know their story."

Docent-led exhibit tours are scheduled for 1:30 p.m. July 23 and Aug. 13, and 7 p.m. Aug. 28; attendees will hear a presentation from a Holocaust survivor at all three events.

The event is free with museum admission or membership; make a reservation by calling (248) 553-2400, ext. 110.

For more information, go to www.holocaustcenter.org.