

A Love Story

by Ruth Chevion

There was an incident during the war that concerned a big ugly fur coat my father was wearing. My mother would chuckle when it came up, get this kind of witchy glint in her eye, and look at him sort of sideways, but I could see my father didn't like the story.

Before the coat incident, there was a romance. It flared up at a dance in Tarnow in 1939. Mom was a relative newcomer to Tarnow. She had moved to Tarnow Poland from Vienna Austria. This alone gave her a sort of exotic appeal, but she was pretty as well, with soft olive skin, big green eyes, full lips, and a mass of wavy chestnut hair. Her mother Sarah dressed her in good clothes, as only the loving mother of a fatherless child can do. Mom's father had died in Vienna many years earlier.

Dad was no less a catch. The eldest son of a wealthy family - his father owned a factory — dad was the elected president of the local chapter of *Samo-Pomoc*, (Sah-moh-Poh Motz) "Self-Help," an organization committed to fighting antisemitism in Poland. One of the goals of *Samo-Pomoc* was to integrate swimming pools, as Jews were not allowed to swim in municipal pools in Poland.

Dad had led a protest a couple of years earlier against the "No Jews in the Pool" rule, which culminated in a bloody brawl between Jewish boys and Catholic boys, and which actually succeeded. In Tarnow thereafter, Jews used the city swimming pool as equals.

In the summer of 1939, the Tarnow chapter of *Samo-Pomoc* held a dance. Mom went. Dad asked her to dance, and that's how it began.

The romance proceeded from there to a picnic. Dad invited his best friend, along with Mom and her best friend, so they were a group of four. Dad's friend, an aspiring journalist, brought his camera along. He took a lot of photos, many too suggestive for a 17-year-old and a 15-year-old of the time, even if they were semi-chaperoned by another boy and girl. Mom's mother was reportedly angry when she saw the photos, which probably did little to lower the temperature between the two young romantics.

The war broke out just a couple of months after the picnic. Pelek and Herta did not see each other again for the duration of the war, from 1939 to 1945, except for the one incident which is the subject of this story:

Dad made a huge effort to locate her, and finally did find her on her grandfather's farm on the outskirts of Lvov. But she refused to let him in and sent someone in the family to send him away. She said it was because he looked awful in the big ugly fur coat he was wearing.

Why did she do it? Why did she send him away? To be sure, my mother could flirt, and this could be interpreted as flirtation, but I'm saying it was not because he looked awful; it was because she looked awful. She had contracted scarlet fever in the famously freezing cold winter of 1941 that left her with stubby blackened front teeth, plus deaf in one ear. No antibiotics were available during the war, even if it had been possible to get a doctor.

Then too, because the war caught her in the east during her summer vacation, she had no proper winter clothes, no coat, no proper boots. She couldn't wash properly or keep her hair nice.

The whole farm situation had deteriorated into poverty because the Russian occupiers, though they did not molest them for being Jews, nonetheless took their horses, cows, and farm produce. There was hunger.

Knowing my mother as I do, I can safely say it was not his big ugly coat that kept her from coming out of the house. I'm saying she did not want the object of her romantic affections to see her looking ugly, thin, unkempt, wearing rags and house slippers in the middle of a Polish-Ukrainian winter.

After the war, after many trials and escapes, her internment in the ghetto, escape from the ghetto, passing and then being caught, escaping again, and then the hiding, and liberation, she found him and went to him, and at his mother's invitation, lived with his family in their home. I'm pretty sure there was no shacking up, but it was not long before Dad's mother, Grandmother Miriam said they had to get married.

I think it's pretty funny that Mom stuck to the big ugly coat story to the very end of his life and hers. My mother could keep a secret. What I wrote here is just my guess based on putting two and two together. As for my father, he did ultimately see her in pretty much the same bad condition at the end of the war. When they met, she asked him how he could still want her. But he did.

Here's one of the photos from the picnic. That's her handwriting on the photo: Tarnow-1939.

