

Herta's Bag by Ruth Chevion

When the Soviets finally drove the Germans out of Krakow on January 18, 1945, my mother was officially liberated. She walked out onto the street in broad daylight for the first time since May of 1943.

She was in reasonably good shape, considering. But she left her hiding place with nothing, no place to go and no family to find. Everything was gone. She walked around until she came upon a free store set up overnight by three Jewish American charities: ORT (Organization for Rehabilitation through Training), HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) and JOINT (Joint American Distribution Committee). At the free store Mom got all the clothes she needed - coat, shoes, everything.

She was Herta Hausknecht again. No more alias. The false ID papers she had with the name Halina Orzeskowa she threw away.

The scene must have been bizarre because Jews were coming out into daylight confused and dazzled, just wandering. Apparently, Jews had been hiding all over Krakow. In this strange scene, my mother bumped into someone she knew - a school friend from Tarnow, who told her that her pre-war boyfriend, Pelek Fessel was alive, and that Pelek had gone back to Tarnow, their home city.

The distance from Krakow to Tarnow is 58 miles. My mother stood by the side of the road until a truck came by carrying Soviet Russian troops. They picked her up. "They never touched me," she said. "They were kind...they gave me some food to eat, and they never touched me. They sang Soviet songs on the way, and then dropped me off." From the way my mother told this story, from her tone of voice, you could deduce how scared she had been to accept the ride, and how grateful she was for their gracious behavior.

When Mom got to Tarnow, she found her boyfriend (who would become my father), together with his mother and his sister, living in an apartment near where they had lived before the war. They invited my mother to move in and live with them, and so began the next stage of Mom's life.

But all this is background, dear reader, for a story that was to become legendary in my world. It is the curious matter of my mother's bag.

My mother had a bag that she always kept with her. While living with her future husband and future in-laws, she took her bag everywhere, even into the bathroom. She kept it right next to her bed at night. It made everyone curious to know what was in the bag. My dad's sister asked him if he knew what was in the bag. He didn't know. Even grandmother Miriam was moved to ask what was in the bag. But Mom simply did not answer, and she did not tell Pelek when he asked her.

It was many years later in America, when I was grown up, that I asked my mother what was in the bag. Looking me right in the eye, with a little smile, she said, "There was nothing in the bag. It was empty."

Interesting, isn't it? Wasn't my mother just the cat's pajamas, dear reader? What was in her mind with this bag? It's just one of the many things I would still like to ask her, but what would she say? Was it something she could describe in words? I leave you with the question.

I would just add a few words of postscript about the free store where my Mom got her clothes, and probably also her famous bag. I feel a need to acknowledge that American charities were instrumental in many people's survival stories.

ORT was a Jewish organization for teaching vocational trades and skills like carpentry and sewing. ORT still exists today.

HIAS also still operates, and helps refugees all over the world, in particular Jewish refugees.

As to the JOINT, it raised 70 million dollars during the Holocaust, and another 300 million dollars immediately afterwards, with which it gave significant help to Jewish refugees wherever they had landed - in Europe, and also in Shanghai, China, in India, and in Latin America.

Though Alicia Moskalska, who hid my mother, did not receive payment during the war, many people who hid Jews received monthly stipends from the American Joint.

Many thanks to all American Jews and non-Jews who helped Jews survive the Holocaust by donating funds for their upkeep in hiding. This was a very difficult, dangerous secret project primarily carried out by the American Joint Distribution Committee, which is little recognized today, but which made the difference for many Jews in hiding.



In this photo I found on the internet, you can see children wearing coats made by ORT.