



The Green Muumuu

A true story of human triumph by Ruth Chevion

Preface: International Holocaust Remembrance Day, as designated by the United Nations, occurs this year on Thursday, January 27. In honor of those who died, and in gratitude for those who survived, I offer this piece about my mother that I wrote 20 years ago.

It is the middle of the day, in the middle of the week, and my mother is stretched out on the couch in her green muumuu reading Stalingrad by Anthony Beevor. She's a busy person by nature, even at age 76. Ordinarily she would be shopping or something, but this book has really grabbed her. Every time we talked on the phone in the last few days she talked about Stalingrad.

Yesterday, she seemed almost out of breath, as though she had run all the way from the year 1942 to the present to answer the phone. Her voice had a quality I had not heard before, even though we have talked about the war a thousand and another thousand times. She sounded alert. That's the only word I can come up with.

I've always been a bit mystified as to how my mother managed to survive the war. Her exploits, her ingenious evasions, seem so out of character with the soft motherly way I experience her. But the tone in her voice yesterday was a clue. While reading the book, she had somehow slipped, like a chameleon, into her clever twin, the one who did those daring things during the war.

"It was all happening while I was there. I was there," she says. "The Germans attacked Russia in June 1941. The height of the attack was in September '42 when their

advance reached Stalingrad. I left the ghetto on September 1, 1942. Aunt Fela came and gave us false papers, me and my mother and Oswald. You remember. I told you. Imagine it was all happening at the same time."

"Imagine in January of 1943 they lost Stalingrad and in March of 1943 they took my mother and Oswald. They were losing already. It was ending already, but they still put so much effort into killing Jews. They didn't have enough gasoline at the front but the little they had they used for killing Jews. Imagine, they had to choose between winning the war and killing the Jews and they chose killing the Jews."

"They sent four Gestapo officers after me. Four." "You mean in the Post Office?" I ask. I had always thought it was two. "Four. They sent four Gestapos to hunt down one 18-year-old girl."

I'm getting a special thrill hearing her this time. She sounds triumphant. After all, there she is on the couch in an elegant Manhattan apartment in her green muumuu with the air conditioner on, and the Nazis are dead.

