

SIDONIA'S THREAD: CRAFTING A LIFE FROM HOLOCAUST TO HIGH FASHION

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With Support from the Eastern Connecticut State University Foundation, Connecticut Humanities, and the Hochberg Committee for Holocaust and Human Rights Education at Temple B'nai Israel in Willimantic, CT





Sidonia Perlstein

THE IMPACT OF WORLD WAR II AND THE HOLOCAUST

Sidonia and her family were deported from their village in Hungary in April 1944 and herded into a ghetto in a nearby city. Eventually, they boarded a cattle train on their way to the Auschwitz Concentration Camp, where most of the members of her family were gassed soon after their arrival. Only Sidonia and her sister, Laura, were chosen for slave labor. For the next year, Sidonia and Laura traveled to two more concentration camps, Dachau and finally, Bergen Belsen, where Laura died of typhus. Liberated in April 1945, Sidonia was the only member of her family who survived. After living in a displaced persons camp for four years after the war, and giving birth to a daughter out of wedlock, Sidonia and her daughter came to America in 1949 seeking a life of freedom, security, and opportunity.

Listen to the "Story of the Zipper" and the "Miracle of the Coat" to learn more about how Sidonia's sewing skill saved her life in a concentration camp.

Sidonia and Hanna had few relatives in America and no family support system, yet Sidonia's design talent helped them survive in a new country. Sidonia's memories of her simple, frugal life in her farming village and of the depravities of the Holocaust helped her not only to save every dollar possible, bringing two dollars to the bank every week, but to create imaginative garments where every piece of fabric is utilized with no waste. Her designs represent her will to survive.

Crafting a Life From
Holocaust to High Fashion

WHO WAS SIDONIA?

Sidonia Perlstein was born and raised in a tiny, remote Hungarian village, far from the urban centers, like Budapest, where shops and stores supplied city residents and where cinemas, automobiles, cameras, and daily newspapers were common. None of these modern conveniences were present in her little town. Born in 1913, Sidonia was the youngest of six siblings and learned to sew at a very young age. The family's clothing was simple, work-related garb, suitable for farm chores in an agricultural hamlet. Until the age of thirty-one, Sidonia, still unmarried, lived a contented life as part of a large family and as a member of her village's communal economic enterprises.

After World War II, Sidonia and her daughter sailed to America, settling in Springfield, Massachusetts, where she immediately began to display her sewing talent.

Working at a women's dress factory, the company noticed her exceptional sewing skill and promoted her to forewoman in just a few years. At home, she used her daughter, Hanna, as her model for her clothing designs, always asking her to "stand up straight." Her daughter remained her favorite model for the rest of her life. Sidonia eventually left the dress factory in the 1960s and began her own design and tailoring business. Starting with only a few customers, her imaginative creations became widely known in Western New England, where many men and women wanted a garment designed and sewn by "Sidonia."

Listen to "The Marathon" for more about Sidonia's remarkable volume in producing garments.

Sidonia never married nor lost her charming Hungarian accent. She became a confident, self-assured woman working with her faithful customers, while earning the respect of her community. She continued to design and sew until the age of ninety, only a few years before her death at ninety-three in 2006.

Listen to "The Last Garments" about Sidonia's production during the last thirty years of her life.

Crafting a Life From Holocaust to High Fashion

“The story of the survivors is not a story of remarkable people. It is a story of how remarkable people can be and there is a difference between the two. What emerged was that human beings have tremendous capacities for strength and regeneration that are often not called into play, but when they are called into play people somehow seem to find the strength to do so.”

- William Helmreich 1991



Between 1945 and 1952, more than 80,000 Jewish Holocaust survivors immigrated to the United States under the terms of the Displaced Persons Act.

Sidonia was unique as a person, but her story of immigration is strikingly similar to the stories of post WWII Jewish immigrants. Barbara Burstin (2009) and Daniel Coleman (1992), based on research, described typical characteristics of survivors, women in particular, who endured years of semi-starvation, the death of their loved ones, and constant terror.

- They were often sole survivors of their entire families, frequently having no network in the US.
- The women's priority was to get married and raise a family. By the end of 1946 in displaced persons camps, nearly a thousand Jewish children were born each month. In 1946-47, displaced persons camps had the highest birth rate in the world.
- Women, much more than the men, tended to measure their success in America by their children's character, education, success, happiness, Jewishness.
- They were less educated or set upon a career path than their peers in the US
- Women often were either seamstresses working out of their homes or they helped their husbands in small businesses such as cleaning or roofing.
- Women adjusted to a new life in America with an "amazing resiliency." They learned English, worked hard and became successful in making a life for themselves, their family, and raising children.
- They did not complain much, and though it is evident that they carried a lot of trauma, they preferred to keep it inside.
- Many of the women remained single
- Survivors did not talk about their holocaust experiences and tended to stay close to those with similar experiences

Springfield Holocaust Survivors

When Sidonia and Hanna arrived as refugees to Springfield, MA in 1949, they soon met the community of Holocaust survivors. After living in one room of a widow's home for the first three years, they moved to an apartment building on a street where many survivors lived, in the north end of the city.

Similar to other survivors who settled in many other parts of the U.S., the Springfield survivors, who referred to themselves as *di grine* in Yiddish, meaning "the greenhorns," preferred to live close to one another since they all shared the losses and deprivations of the Holocaust. They spoke mainly Yiddish to each other since they represented so many different European countries and Yiddish was a language they all understood. They were ambitious, humorous, and resilient, eager to build new lives in America for themselves and their children, born after World War II.

However, after only a decade in America, they had learned the English language, attained American citizenship, and secured decent jobs or built their own businesses. By the end of the 1950s, *di grine* dispersed from the north end and moved to nicer quarters in another part of the city or purchased their own homes.

They never forgot their former lives, but they were ready to live as real Americans.



SIDONIA'S LIFE AS AN IMMIGRANT

Sidonia's life as an immigrant in America bore no resemblance to the one she had lived in her little Hungarian village. She was totally on her own, with a child to support and no family to assist her. With little formal education and no knowledge of the English language, Sidonia had to determine how she could make a living as a woman in a male-oriented society. She decided that her design and dress-making skill was the only way she could both earn a living income and make a name for herself in America.

Like most immigrants, both male and female, Sidonia knew that hard work and perseverance were necessary to succeed. As her fluency in the English language improved, so did her ability to manage her own business and interact with her growing number of customers. As time went on, and more people sought her one-of-a-kind designs, she achieved her dream of local fame and recognition for her creative acumen. She had climbed the economic and social ladder to become a contributing American citizen.

Sidonia never forgot her lost family and the childhood and young adulthood she had lived prior to World War II. Immigrants, like Sidonia retain their memories of their former lives, yet at the same time, also strive to assimilate into their new country. Sidonia often silently used her stunning creative work as a cover for her painful secrets of a past that no longer existed.

Listen to "The Return of the Native" for more about Sidonia's return visit to her native village in Hungary many years later, and "Who's the Fashion Boss?" about Sidonia's growing assertiveness when choosing patterns.



STYLE AND TEXTILE

Sidonia remained a secretive loner for most of her life in America. Her best means of expression was through her creative art with textile and thread, pouring her emotion into her tailored garments. She was a keen observer of style and trends, often a forerunner of styles that had not yet gained popularity. Her favorite patterns were Vogue and Butterick, adding her own special touches to each garment. She could often be found reading fashion magazines to learn the latest trends and frequently created garments for her daughter that were not as yet known to residents of New England. Most of the items in the collection were made for Sidonia's daughter, Hanna, who posed for weekly fittings during all of their life together.

Listen to "The Dressmaker's Debut" for more about the turning point dress and "The Immodest Mini" to learn more about Sidonia's attention to style, sometimes inadvertently creating challenges for her daughter.

As you view Sidonia's designs, you can learn a great deal about her personality. Note the precision of the stitching; the variety of colors and prints; the attention paid to perfect buttons to match or offset the garment; the use of various natural fabrics, especially wool, silk, and cotton; the use of a particular pattern to highlight the fabric; the economic use of textiles, with no fabric ever wasted; and the overall beauty of her creations. Her styles were distinctly her own.

A stylized orange Star of David (Magen David) is centered on the page. A black pen nib is positioned at the top left, with a red line looping around the star, suggesting a signature or a decorative element.

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High Fa

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Sidonia's Citizenship Document, 1954

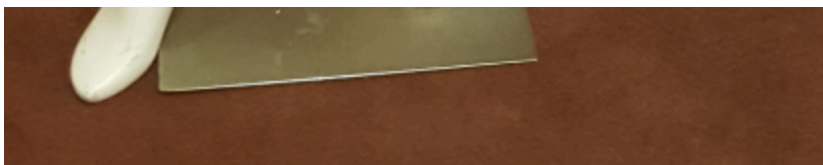


Sidonia's business card



s 1960 tweed jacket by
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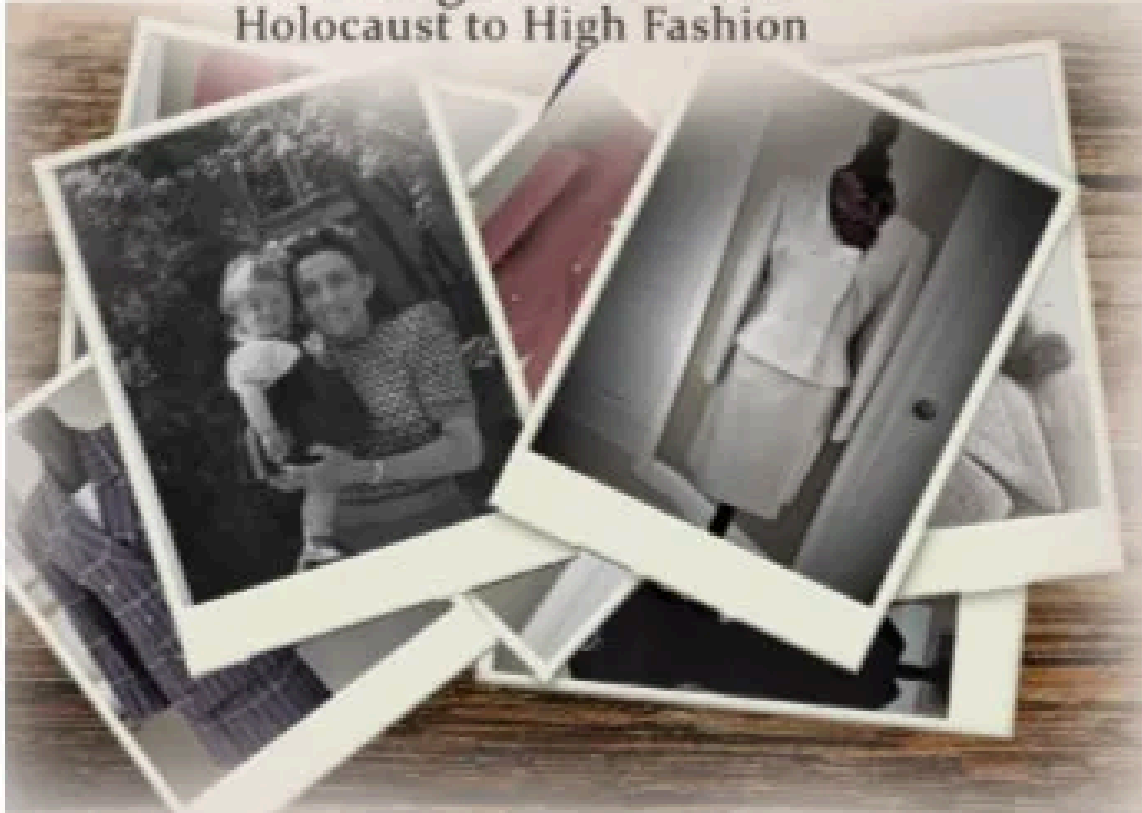
British designer Margaret
Howell has been in
tweed



Sidonia's Thread



Crafting a Life From
Holocaust to High Fashion



How did a single immigrant mother survive on her own in America? Through her wits, her imagination, and above all, her hands. See the creative legacy of Sidonia Perlstein, Holocaust survivor, mother, and master of needle work!

—February 8th to April 28th 2019—

Exhibit at the
Windham Textile
and
History Museum

Friday thru Sunday 10AM - 4PM
411 Main St, Willimantic, CT 06226

Co-sponsored by Eastern Connecticut State University; Connecticut Humanities (a nonprofit affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities, which supports cultural and historic organizations that tell the state's stories, build community and enrich lives); the Neighbors Committee













1996 - ENSEMBLE/JACKET AND SKIRT
Combination of black and white wool headscarf and black skirt
Wool scarf is an item from Laura Croze

Exhibition of the Museum of Fashion

