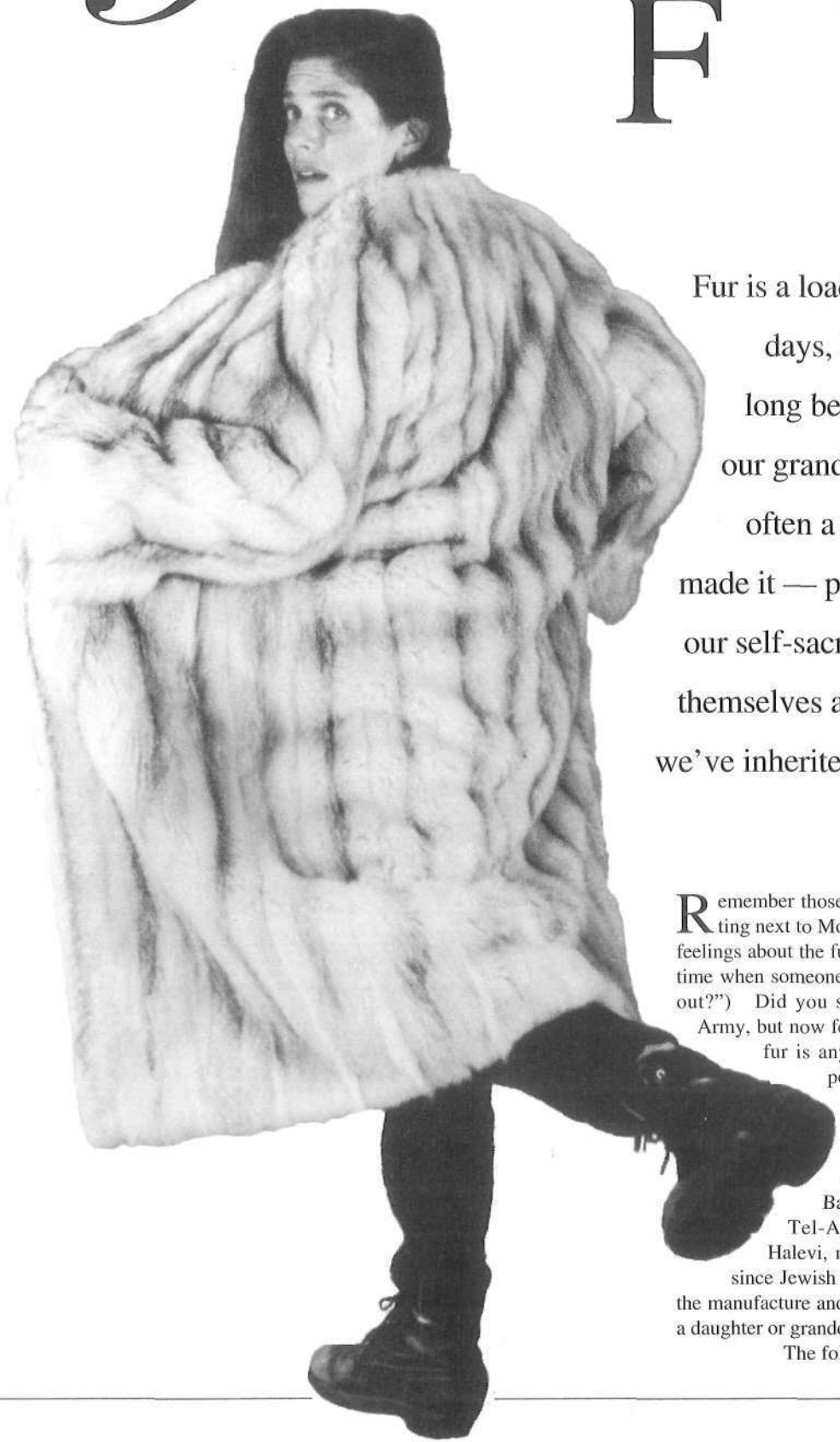


Inheriting F U R



Fur is a loaded topic for everyone these days, but for Jewish women it has long been laden with meaning. For our grandmothers (or mothers) it was often a symbol of arrival, of having made it — perhaps it was the one luxury our self-sacrificing foremothers allowed themselves after years of making do. So we've inherited these coats, and they hang in our hallway closets.

Remember those childhood hours you spent stroking it, sitting next to Mom or Bubbe in *shul*? We have complicated feelings about the furs. (A friend of ours wore hers for the last time when someone shouted at her, "How'd you get the blood out?") Did you send your inherited fur off the Salvation Army, but now feel badly about it? Though it's unclear that fur is any worse than leather, down, or even high pollutant human-made fibers like thinsulate or polyethylene, fur's high visibility/high indulgence factor particularly invites scorn. It feels so good as we brush past it in the closet; it reminds us of Ma at Benjy's Bar Mitzvah — but we could never wear it. Tel-Aviv Chief Sephardic rabbi, Haim David Halevi, recently issued a compassionate ruling that since Jewish law forbids the causing of pain to animals, the manufacture and wearing of fur coats is forbidden. What's a daughter or granddaughter to do?

The following story and vignettes tackle the issue.

She rarely wore it,
guarding it like a hen
her chicks.

For women of her time and place, a mink coat was the ultimate status symbol. Whatever sufferings these Holocaust survivors had endured, during either the war or the nights and days of their new lives in America, the fur coat, trite as it may have been to some, was a mighty symbol of security. In my mother's case, this security did not extend to very many material objects. She permitted herself few comforts, walking long distances to save pennies, forgoing the bus even when the groceries were heavy and the weather unfriendly, working in a quickly darkening room rather than "wasting the light," and rarely eating anything when it was fresh and tempting — she preferred to wait until the family had finished to see what was left over. And, when it came to her wardrobe, her everyday clothes had seen far too many washings and pressings. Making do was a philosophy of life for my mother.

My parents came to America in 1951. Right from the beginning they worked in a variety of jobs and, finally, in their own business, often fourteen hours a day, seven days a week. Much as we four children labored to awaken them to the American practice of taking a summer vacation, it never worked. To close up the store, to abandon their comfortable apartment, to go sleep in strange beds and be at the mercy of restaurants (to them "restaurant" was a four letter word), was "mishigas," craziness. It was widely known among their circle of immigrant friends that restaurants served all manner of

"chazerai," slop worthy only of pigs, often spoiled, from kitchens which would ruin your appetite had you the misfortune to enter them. And special holidays, like Mother's or Father's day, don't even ask! These



The author's parents, 1965.

were the times when the worst of the "chazerai" was served to people who took their parents out in order to poison them and get the "yirishch," inheritance, sooner. No, this sleeping and eating in the streets was not one of the Americanizations adopted by our family.

My parents too often responded to my Americanized needs with their party line: "Vos noch darfst die? What else do you need? You have a roof, a bed and potatoes." Little did they know the list that I had formulated. I needed so many things which they dismissed as "narischkeit," nonsense. I gladly would have traded my "plenty," as they saw it, for a leaky cabin in South Haven, Michigan one summer weekend, a sleeping bag on a camp-out in the woods, or a cheeseburger with the works and a cherry coke at any Howard Johnson's, anywhere. So many American symbols of arrival were viewed with suspicion in our family that it was quite startling when sometime in the 'sixties my mother began admiring and expressing interest in the mink coats of other women in my parents' circle. Their social life was limited to visiting back and forth at friends' homes, weddings and bar mitzvahs (bat mitzvahs were as yet uncommon in their milieu) and the one or two dances held each year by the "greench," newcomers' organizations. So

BUBBA INVESTS IN A MINK

Last year my mother got a call from her mother. Bubba sounded strange — almost as if she were about to cry. "Jeannie," she began, pausing to give her words the proper weight, "I'm at Epstein's. They're having a sale." This being not particularly exceptional, my mother waited. "A sale on fur coats," Bubba went on. "I'm standing here in a gorgeous white mink coat! They say it looks perfect on me! And it's so cheap! Oh Jeannie, I've never had a fur coat — it's so gorgeous — and you know I never spend money on myself. . . I've been so cold these winters . . ."

Gradually it became clear to my mother that Bubba was asking her for permission to buy the mink. Firmly committed to sacrifice as a way of life, Bubba needed someone else's okay to indulge herself. "It's an investment, you know," she continued, "they're having such a sale, and when I'm gone it will be yours, and then Karen's and Tamar's."

"Mommy, I don't want a fur coat," answered my mother. "I don't like fur coats. Get it for yourself — you want it and you'll be warm."

"Really? I should do it? Oh, I just don't know. . ."

"Mommy, just buy the coat. Enjoy it."

"Okay, Jeannele. I can't wait to show it to you. . . Oh I can't believe this — you know I never spend money on myself. . ."

The next weekend Bubba brought the coat, an event so momentous she arranged for a ride to our house rather than taking the usual two buses. She modeled it for us, then had me try it on (my mother refused). I had never worn a fur coat before, and could not believe how luxurious it felt; I couldn't stop stroking my arms. I felt like the Ukrainian *krasavitsa* [beauty] Bubba and her sisters called me when they got together and spoke Russian.

I haven't seen the coat since that weekend; Bubba can't seem to bring herself to wear it; it's "too good." So the investment hangs in her closet, waiting for my mother, or so Bubba hopes. I keep hoping that this winter Bubba will wear it — at least once.

—Karen Prager



HOW TO HONOR THE DEAD

Barbara Colgan of Hopewell, New Jersey, noticed that a lot of women she knew had the same dilemma — what to do with Grandma's fur coat hanging in the attic. Her observations soon turned into a full-time retirement career: transforming fur coats into teddy bears. For one hundred and thirty dollars, Colgan will recycle your inheritance into a custom-made 14 to 18 inch teddy bear (this is one big teddy bear!), complete with Plexiglas child-proof eyes, jointed arms and legs (husband David does the jointing), and birth announcement. ("You can name the bear after Grandma.") "Send me the whole coat," says Colgan, "and I'll make lots of bears out of it — one for every daughter and granddaughter in the family. I deal only," she adds shyly, "in memories." Dividing one sable coat into 4 or 5 equal bear parts serves to solve that mathematical puzzler, too—who gets the single undesirable object?

Colgan says that just about everyone is completely stumped by what to do with inherited fur—even thrift shops. ("Nobody buys the old furs, plus they take up too much rack space.") Elderly customers sometimes bring their own furs to Colgan, knowing that none of their children wants to inherit

them: The coats will get closeted for years, and then dumped, all to the tune of dysgenic guilt. "But *no one*," says Colgan, "throws out a mink teddy bear."

Jewish women may feel some anxiety over the perceived in-group nature of such privileged dilemmas. Colgan is reassuring. "The most commonplace memory that people seem to have, when they talk to me about the furs they've inherited, is of stroking their hands over Granny's coat while standing next to her in church."



Bronya Zagrabelna, 1912, holding potential teddy bear.

Sewing and stuffing each bear from scratch (each one takes four days to make), Colgan asks customers individualized questions: "Do you have an antique doily of your grandmother's? This bear would look so pretty in a ruffly lace collar." Her most recent transformation was a Persian lamb coat (again, Grandma's) with a gray mink collar; it became three Persian lamb teddy bears (one per granddaughter) with mink-tipped ears. (Having identical bears in three different cousins' bedrooms is, in itself, touching.) A fur coat's brocade lining makes very silky foot pads. "I've done Dad's tweed winter coat and Grandpa's plaid wool fishing jacket, too," adds Colgan, "but recycled furs are the most wonderful."

To further problem-solve this endangered-breed/sentimental-kitsch dialectic, contact Barbara Colgan, The World's Smallest Teddy Bear Factory, P.O. Box 483, 10 Eaton Place, Hopewell, NJ 08525. 609-466-0411.

—Susan Schnur

No coat had ever kept me so warm before — and I knew that it was not just the fur, but the comfort of knowing that it had been worn by my mother.

what was this sudden burning interest in a mink? Children were not asked their opinions in our family and before I knew it my mother had a richly hued full length mink coat with a large shawl collar and, best of all in my eyes, exquisite rhinestone buttons.

It looked lovely on her, made her feel like a queen, and was the perfect just-below-the-knee length which fit the short hemlines of the time. To my mother it was such an "oitser [treasure]" that she rarely wore it, saving it for only the most special of occasions, and then, guarding it like a hen her chicks. Having never had her name or initials embroidered into the lining as some women did, she lived in constant fear of the coat being mistakenly, if not purposely, taken. So, when she finally did wear it, it was like having a baby all over again. No daycare for this baby; the coat never saw the interior of a cloak room. Either she held it, sat with it, or, if moved to dance, circled only within a small radius of her mink —and even then her eyes never left it. In my mind, it was an albatross, but to her, it was a beloved symbol of how far she had come in the new world.

In 1984, my dear mother died. The question of what to do with her precious coat arose, and my sister and I discussed its disposition. It was by then some twenty years old and quite outmoded, so neither one of us rushed to claim it. We thought about having it remodeled and, as I was living a somewhat bohemian life style and took forever to deal with such things, we both agreed that my sister would take the coat and have it redone.

Five years passed and I had pretty much forgotten the coat until the strong anti-fur lobby aroused both my sympathy and my memory of my mother's mink. It was with a youngest sibling's great pleasure that I discovered that I was not the only procrastinator in the family. After the most casual of inquiries about alterations, my sister had hung the coat in an extra closet and promptly forgotten it. When I asked her about it, she admitted that she had decided against remodeling the coat and probably would never use it. I put the coat on and noticed that something had changed since the last time I tried it on. In recent years I had grown partial to retro styles, and the clothing that was popular when I was young held great charm for me. The coat was definitely dated; too full, too short, with too large a shawl collar. It was just "too" — if June Cleaver had ever owned a mink coat, this surely would have been it. I decided that I loved it. Would I wear it? . . . now that was a tougher question.

My sister graciously offered me our mother's coat and I accepted. However, when I got it home, I had trouble deciding when and where I would indeed wear it. I felt somewhat uncomfortable wearing fur and knew that I couldn't wear it into the city where the anti-fur activists were sure to pounce on me. Would they understand my dilemma when I explained that I didn't purchase the coat; rather I wore it because it had been my mother's and wearing it made me feel closer to her? I doubted it. Torn between the desire to wear my

mother's coat and my own confused feelings, I undertook a mission of stealth and decided to wear it under cover of darkness on the late night walks I took with my husband.

The winter was brutal — the coldest in many years. Still, despite the cold, I could forgo a hat and raise the shawl collar around my head, feeling enveloped and hugged. How wonderfully toasty I felt. No coat had ever kept me so warm before—and I knew that it was not just the fur, but the comfort of knowing that it had been worn by my mother. I had worn the coat two or three times before I thrust my hand into the pocket late one night as we were about to walk out the door. I felt something in the pocket and stepped back into the light to see what I had discovered: a yellowing book of matches from the Hilton Hotel in Chicago—where my parents lived—and a small wear-softened square of paper. I unfolded the paper and recognized my mother's distinctive European handwriting. Tears sprang to my eyes. She had carefully written down her name, "Mrs. P. Nuss, her address and phone number. Why in the world. . . and suddenly it came to me. She had always feared the loss of her precious mink and since her name was nowhere on it, she had inscribed it on this little piece of paper, hop-

ing the note would help the coat find its way home if ever they were separated.

It was eleven o'clock on a cold winter night and I stood in the hallway crying tears of confusion, pain, and joy. I was swaddled in my mother's mink coat, clutching to my face a scrap of paper bearing her precious writing which she had held in her own hands who knew how many years ago. I was flooded with love and longing for her; and with something else: the inexplicable joy of miraculously receiving a note from my dear mother whom I never expected to hear from in this way again.

For many months a small brass picture frame I found in a drawer had stood on a living room end table, empty. I don't know what possessed me to display an empty frame, but suddenly, as I stood in the hallway, the frame's purpose became clear. I took the note I had just received from my mother and slid it into the frame, under the glass. I felt good. . . very good; and, raising the shawl collar, I pulled the coat tighter, buttoned those beautiful rhinestone buttons, and went out for a walk in the cold night air with my husband.

Sara Nuss-Galles is a writer living with her husband, Arie Galles, an artist, and two college-age children in Madison, NJ.

ROVER'S WORLD

When I was around 18, my father one day announces, "Now that you're a woman, it's time you got a fur coat. We're gonna do it today. Get dressed." Of course my mother and grandmother had furs (when I was a kid I loved to warm my hands under their armpits). So my Dad and I go to Bonwit-Teller—this is Chicago. Just the two of us. And we sit in a chair and an old-fashioned saleswoman *brings* furs to us—you don't go through racks in the fur salon at Bonwit's. I tried on lots. I was kind of in a blur.

I settle on a feathered raccoon, very high collar you could lose yourself in. The coat zips in half so it can be either calf-length, or thigh-length and sporty. We buy a big leather belt to go with it. The coat has three little eyelets that close it. It costs \$2000 and I wear it home. I feel so incredibly grown up. I name the coat Rover.

Now of course I was a nature person, a tomboy. My idea of pleasure was to lie in the woods and pick worms out of the dirt. At age 13, I had decided I would never shave my legs or under my arms. I was a canoeist, a wilderness person, certainly not pampered. Naturally I didn't want to take Rover off with me to college (to Duke)—I didn't want other people to see me this way; I didn't see myself this way.

But every time I came home to Chicago, I stepped back into Rover's world. I would wear Rover when I was with my parents. My mother and grandmother and I would all be in our furs, and we'd ride in my Dad's Cadillac.

As I got older, I wore Rover less and less. The coat stayed in Chicago in my parents' closet. I didn't want it. My folks kept trying to send Rover to me, but I said no. Once when I was in New York with my mother, she was physically harassed by a group of anti-fur picketers in front of the Colliseum. I had become a staunch environmentalist by then, but I had to defend my mother physically, which I did. I'd taken karate for years.

When I was 32, my mother died, and my father decides to bring Rover out to me in Princeton (where I live), and my mother's fur coats too. My Mom's mink went to my father's sister. I got my Mom's cloth-outside-fur-inside coat, very classy, beautiful. I put both Rover and my mother's coat into storage where they remained for four years. It cost me like fifty dollars a year just to store them.

One day the storage place closes for repainting, so I end up with Rover again and I drive it to a second-hand shop. I clip out the little brass plate with my name on it that was sewn into the lining—just in case Rover should ever cycle back to my father.

Rover remained in the second-hand shop all winter; no one bought it. Which made me upset. I felt huffy. I was trying to sell it for hardly anything—\$300. I mean its entire life had been spent in storage. So then I shlep it, the thing weighs a million tons, to a thrift shop and I *give* Rover to them as a donation. "Do nice people buy here?" I ask the saleswoman. I want-

ed someone nice to have the coat, someone who would give Rover a good home. She says, "Honey, I don't know who shops here." So there goes Rover.

So now I still have my mother's cloth-outside-fur-inside coat. It's hanging in my closet like a corpse. I can't wear it. I can't get rid of it; it wouldn't be nice to my mother. So there it is. Isn't this funny? So this is my crazy fur story.

I have to admit that Rover did afford me a great deal of pleasure. When my Dad bought it for me, I knew it was a great gift of love. Rover was my Dad's acknowledgement of me as a woman. I had no idea then that I wouldn't be that kind of woman at all.

—as told to Susan Schnur by Liz Cutler

It was a sable, said my father—a sable coat that my grandmother went to Siberia to buy. Five thousand rubles, said my father—all the proceeds from the sale of the store. She sold the store to join my grandfather in America, he said, and she bought the coat to carry with her and sell for sustenance in the new world.

She went on the train to Siberia—unheard of for a woman in those days, said my father—picked out the skins, had them made into a coat, had the fur coat sewn inside a cloth coat and, wearing both coats and shepherding her four children (two boys and two girls), crossed overland to the Black Sea and boarded a ship bound, eventually, for Philadelphia.

His mother, he said, was intelligent and not beautiful. The photograph shows a long face with a narrow forehead, small eyes, a large jaw, and a gentle mouth. When she was fifteen, said my father, she concluded, from observing the world around her, that god was either evil or did not exist. When she told this to her father she was disowned, handed her dowry tied up in a kerchief, and told to depart.

The family was prominent in the village. Its surname was Hispanic—the residue of some Portuguese ancestor flung east by the Inquisition and left for dead in the dark Russian forest. How did they know he was Portuguese? I asked my father, years later. Who said he was Portuguese? he asked. You. Well, I thought it sounded more interesting than Spanish. Then the family was really from Spain? Who knows? he said.

My grandmother, carrying the kerchief with her dowry inside, walked alone down a narrow path through the dark forest of the Pale until she came to another village—Khruscha, said

my father. The map today shows no such village. With the rubles wrapped in the kerchief, she purchased supplies, opened a general store, and became, within a few years, a woman of substance.

She lived alone in a small house at the end of the village. At the end of the fields beyond her gate, the forest began. Wolves moved softly in the shadows, just out of sight. Gypsies camped among the trees. They bought cloth at the store, and my grandmother stitched the panels into tents for them on her small treadle machine—the only one in Khruscha. Peasants visited too—to buy the gunpowder she sold illegally. (Years later, one of them warned her of a pogrom and offered to hide her children in his hayloft. She drove them there in her wagon, but the pogrom never came; it had chosen a larger village.)

In due course, my grandmother married. My grandfather was handsome and simple, with a fierce temper. She was lucky to get him, people said. At twenty-six, prosperous and plain, she was an old maid. He was 20.

Three children were born. My grandmother was pregnant with a fourth—my father—when word came that the Czar's recruiters had

already reached the borders of the province. It was known, even in Khruscha, that one did not refuse an offer from the Czar and that Jews taken by his army never returned.

My grandfather made plans for his flight. He would go to Argentina—there was family there. Rubles wrapped in a kerchief were delivered to a cousin who worked for the steamship company. The cousin booked passage for my grandfather on a ship out of Riga, and traveled to Khruscha to deliver the ticket in person.

A week later my father was born. My grandfather stayed for the circumcision. That night he crept into the forest and headed west.

The path widened as he walked along and he reached Riga with days to spare. The cousin had written the name of a rooming house on a crumpled slip of paper. My grandfather showed it to people on the street. Eventually, someone who spoke Yiddish gave him directions.

At the rooming house were also other people waiting to depart. Among them was a woman from a village not far from Khruscha. Her husband, she said, had left the year before, made his fortune as a paperhanger in a place called Philadelphia, and had sent for his family to join him.

When my grandfather reached America, she said, he could work for her husband and board at their house. A man from Khruscha, she said, was a man who could be trusted. My grandfather was readily convinced. He traded his ticket to Buenos Aires for one to New York.

He failed to inform my grandmother of his change in plans. The ship bound for the Argentine sank with all on board. When the cousin at the steamship company saw the report, he traveled to Khruscha to tell my grandmother in person. She observed the month

of mourning and resumed her mercantile life.

Eventually a letter arrived. My grandfather was living in a place called Philadelphia and selling fruit from a pushcart. When he had sold enough oranges and bananas, he wrote (no one in Khruscha could translate this second word but everyone agreed it must be some kind of fruit), he would send for them.

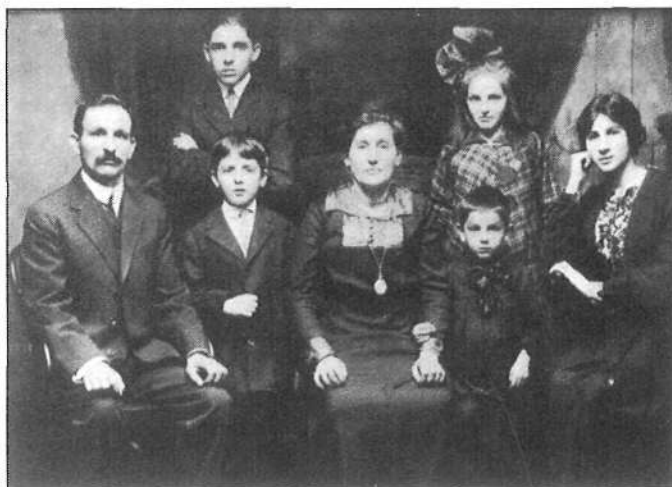
Years passed. My father spent his days at the store by his mother's side. As he grew, she would talk to him about her life and other things he was too young to understand. When he was three, another letter came: all was ready.

My grandmother sold the store. Take the money and buy shoes, said the people in Khruscha. Shoes are rare in America, they said, and bring a good price. Instead, she got on a train to Siberia and, as I said before, bought a sable coat.

For three weeks across the ocean, three decks down, she wore the cloth coat with the sable coat inside. It was hot and she was seasick and not allowed on deck, but she never removed the coat, not even when she slept.

My father was no longer at her side. Still nursing when they

Disowned at fifteen,
she was handed her
dowry tied up in a kerchief,
and told to depart.



The Family, Philadelphia, circa 1912.

boarded, he had been sent with his older brother to the men's quarters on the other side of the hold. He would avoid ocean travel for the rest of his life.

In America, my grandfather was waiting. He had grown a beard. Who is the old Jew? my father asked. My grandfather caught him up in his arms. My father began to cry.

The family traveled to South Philadelphia, where my grandfather lived in a single room. He had bought extra furniture to welcome his family—a table, two chairs, and a second bed. The next morning, my grandmother walked out into the new world wearing the cloth coat with the sable coat inside. She returned with only the outer coat on her back. The sable had been sold for \$5000; she had thrown in my grandfather's pushcart for free.

The next day, she rented a storefront where my grandfather's oranges and bananas could go on permanent display. She then walked into a large building nearby and wandered through the halls until she heard a man speaking Yiddish. It was a hospital and he ran the kitchen. By the time she left, he had agreed to buy his produce from her.

As the pushcart dissolved into the storefront, the storefront gave way to a walk-in grocery store, which became another and then another and finally four. In South Philadelphia, said my father, they called this a chain.

The family prospered and my grandmother decided to do what the Americans did: use the money on hand to make more. She asked my father—always a good student—to translate the stock market listings into Yiddish, then made her choices, tripled her stake, and sold out. This was in September, 1929.

Seeking more tangible holdings, she plowed her profits in land—a vacant corner lot at the edge of the neighborhood for \$1100. For twenty years, the weeds grew. Then the Pennsylvania Railroad offered \$10,000. She refused. The offer rose. At \$100,000, she sold; my grandfather had threatened divorce if she did not. (She had planned to hold out for \$1100 more to recoup her investment.)

On this sum, the two retired and moved to Atlantic City, where, with children and grown grandchildren—most of them prosperous and some even prominent in the community—they lived comfortably, strolling on the boardwalk and playing gin. My grandmother always won and my grandfather always threw down his cards and charged her with cheating.

There is a picture. They sit side by side on straight chairs placed slightly apart on a wide clipped lawn in front of a Tudor-style house. She wears a housedress and white orthopedic shoes. They look straight into the camera's eye. Eventually, they died.

Of the four children who had crossed the ocean, three survived. The younger of the two girls, never strong, died of tuberculosis at sixteen; the disease had been going round the tenement where they lived. It was for the best, they said. She was too frail for this hard, bright land. The two boys received scholarships to college.

The youngest son, the one born in America, never finished high school. Larger and simpler than the rest, he shepherded his siblings through the rough Irish streets that blocked the way to school, and ended up running underground garages in apartment houses his oldest brother built.

The oldest brother became a contractor, then owner of a steel company, then a millionaire, then city housing commissioner. He was convicted of having committed three felonies while in office—misfea-

sance, malfeasance, and nonfeasance. And what did he do?—asked his wife bitterly—he gave a job to his brother. Character witnesses were his only defense. He was placed on probation for a year. He remained president of the synagogue.

My father, the middle son, had never joined the congregation. At his Bar Mitzvah, he performed as required and then walked up the aisle and out of the hall. He never returned. The god who had let his sister die, he reasoned, was either evil or nonexistent.

My father went to medical school, married my mother—who was intelligent and not plain—became director of a large hospital, and grew rich (though not as rich as his older brother) and important. Eventually, he died.

At his funeral, I asked my aunt, his older sister, the one who had survived, about Khruscha and the crossing and the sable coat

that had bridged two worlds. The family was dissolving and I needed to keep the stories clear.

What sable coat? she asked. I told her. I don't remember anything like that, she said. And the trip to Siberia? My aunt was shocked. In those days, she said, it was not safe for a woman in Russia to travel alone. My aunt had been ten at the time; if her mother had taken such a trip, she would have known.

They told her to take shoes, I prodded. Yes, she said, I do remember that. Shoes were handmade and very expensive then, and Mom had the cobbler in Khruscha make an extra pair for each of us in case we couldn't find any in America.

She came to Khruscha because she denounced god, I said. (I was afraid to ask about the Gypsies; I couldn't bear to lose them.) Where did you get that idea? asked my aunt. Mom was always observant—went to *shul*, kept kosher. No, she came to Khruscha because her father wouldn't let her marry the boy she wanted to because he was poor. Mom was so unhappy they sent her away to live with her married sister in Khruscha. It was the sister who arranged the marriage with Pop. He came from a good family; they ran the general store. The boy she loved came to America too. He's now a millionaire. Mom always kept track of him, even though he didn't live in Philadelphia.

My father never told me anything like that, I said. Maybe Mom never told him, said my aunt.


My aunt was intelligent and plain. She had married a man who was simple and handsome, with a sweet disposition. He turned out to be the son of the very woman my grandfather had met at the rooming house in Riga, the one who had lured him to America.

At sea, my grandfather had lost the slip of paper on which she had written her husband's address, and with it his chance to enter the paperhanging trade. It turned out the woman had long since died.

My aunt and uncle had three children. One son became a psychiatrist; the other killed himself in a motel room in Albuquerque. The daughter married well.

At my father's funeral, those who wanted to see the body had been invited into a separate room before the service began. My mother stared straight ahead as if she hadn't heard. My aunt was the only one who went. She emerged weeping.

My father had fallen and died in the street after several heart attacks as well as general physical decline. We found him laid out on the mortuary table with a rough gray sheet pulled up to his chest. His face was bruised and blotchy, with a large bloody spot where his cheek had hit the pavement. His skin was grayish-blue. The flesh

ake the money and buy shoes, said the people in Khruscha. Shoes are rare in America. Instead, she bought a sable coat.

had already begun to withdraw from the skull. His nose was a hawk's beak. The softness and beguiling charm were gone, the harsh bones revealed.

I had the funeral director photograph him then. That was how I wanted to remember him—the basic design. As my aunt re-entered the funeral hall, I caught a glimpse of the face she had seen—smooth and powder pink—before the lid closed forever.

No, said my aunt. I don't remember any sable coat. She paused. Maybe it was another coat. When we got to Ellis Island, she said, there was one moment when we thought they wouldn't let us in. We had each been examined by the doctors—eyes and skin and lungs—and then sent on down the line. But then one of them told us to wait and came and took your father out of Mom's arms and stood him back up on the examining table. Mom was sure they'd found something wrong and we would all have to go back to Khrushcha and live there forever. My sister began to cry.

The doctor called another doctor over and then an inspector, and

then some others, and they all watched as the doctor turned your father slowly around and around on the table. And they were all smiling. You father was wearing a cap and a Russian coat trimmed with fur that Mom had made for him, said my aunt, and he looked so sweet.

And then, she said, the doctor picked your father up and carried him back to us in his little fur-trimmed Russian coat and put him back in Mom's arms. And the doctor smiled at all of us. And they let us through.

I could see them as she spoke—my father in his little Russian coat snug in the arms of my grandmother, the oldest brother walking by her side, the two girls, one sturdy, one frail, following behind. My grandmother is wearing a lush sable coat. The long hem drags a bit in the dust as she leads her family out into the American air, and the tips of the fur glisten in the hard, bright light.

Deborah Solomon has been an actress, lawyer, science writer and newspaper editor. She lives in Newbury, VT, and is at work on a book about new mothers over 40.

STATUS SYMBOL:
BEFORE FUR COATS, THERE WAS THE *SHTERNTIKHL*

From the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research Archives



In Europe some 150 years ago, another garment emerged as the quintessential symbol of Jewish matronly success for one generation—and the object of scorn for the next. The *shterntikhl*, (literally “forehead-kerchief”), also known as a *kopbinde* or a *bindalik*, was an elaborately ornamented head-covering worn by married Jewish women in Central and Eastern Europe from the late Middle Ages to the early nineteenth century. Not only did it function as a covering for the married woman's hair—a requirement of Jewish laws of female modesty—but it also served as a display of status.

Made of pearls, gems, and gold and silver thread, and worn by wealthy Ashkenazic women on holidays and other special occasions, *shterntikhlekh* often contained the bulk of a family's worth. Thus wearing a *shterntikhl* at community gatherings was a way of displaying one's fortunes.

However, during the *Haskalah* [the Jewish Enlightenment, beginning in the late eighteenth century], the *shterntikhl* was singled out by the first generation of modern Yiddish writers as a symbol of all that was wrong with traditional Jewish life. Indeed, the earliest surviving modern Yiddish novel, written by Yisroel Aksenfeld (circa 1840), is entitled *Dos Shterntikhl*. The novel offers biting social commentary

on traditional shtetl values. In the preface to his novel, Aksenfeld suggests that this newly obsolete garment “be put in alcohol, to be exhibited one day,” along with other outdated forms of Jewish costume, for future generations.

Thus, by the mid-nineteenth century, what had been a symbol of feminine modesty and status became a cultural relic, epitomizing class division, materialism, and the unjust treatment of women in the traditional Jewish community.

—Jeffrey Shandler

ADVERTISEMENT

Correction: This poem appears in The Lilith Question: A Chapbook, edited by Henny Wenkart, available from National Council of Jewish Women, 212-535-5900.	it was always safe there but safety	in and out of people's sexual fantasies
LILITH	wasn't enough. I kept nagging pointing out flaws in his logic	now I work in New Jersey take art lessons live with a cabdriver
kicked myself out of paradise left a hole in the morning no note no goodbye	he carried a god around in his pocket consulted it like a watch or an almanac	he says: baby what I like about you is your sense of humor
the man I lived with was patient and hairy	it always proved I was wrong	sometimes I cry in the bathroom remembering Eden and the man and the god I couldn't live with
he cared for the animals worked late at night planting vegetables under the moon	two against one isn't fair! I cried and stormed out of Eden into history	ENID DAME
sometimes he'd hold me our long hair tangled he kept me from rolling off the planet	the Middle ages were sort of fun they called me a witch I kept dropping	This poem, which ran with a typographical error in LILITH Summer 1991, is reprinted here in its entirety.

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