

Imelda and Me

A Hidden Child's Fancy Footwork

BY IRENE FRISCH

Several years ago, in the wake of the overthrow of the Marcos government in the Philippines, the media reported (among other curiosities) news about the shoe closet of the President's wife Imelda. On hundreds of shelves, arranged neatly, were literally thousands of pairs of shoes—all belonging to the Philippines' First Lady.

My husband joked, "She has almost as many shoes as you do." Reading the news story over his shoulder, I responded as might be expected—I didn't find Imelda's collection all that extravagant.

Though my husband and I are of modest means, it is true that I too, like Imelda, have a penchant for shoes. In fact, I have hoarded shoes for nearly 50 years: high heels and low, shoes for winter and summer, evening and daytime, boots as well as slippers, shoes for spring, shoes for fall. Many have not yet been worn, and some never will be.

Most recently I bought several pairs of shoes while on vacation in Europe, shopping with equal gusto at both the fanciest boutiques of Paris and the mercato flea markets of Italy. I just cannot pass in front of a shoe store without stopping in and discovering a particularly good buy.

I have also, over many years, perfected the art of slipping my purchases into my home undetected. In plain brown shopping bags, the shoes make it past husband and children, avoiding their "what, more shoes!!?" interrogations. Before I was married, living with my parents, I did the same to avoid my mother's disapproving eye and comments.

But it wasn't until reading about Imelda that I began to really think about my history with shoes, about what they mean to me.

After largely comfortable years of early childhood in Poland, my life's good fortune was drastically reversed by the Nazi invasion. Being Jewish, I was forced to go into hiding in order to survive. A gentile woman rescued my mother and me, hiding us in her apartment for the duration of World War II.

I was 11 when I went into hiding, a girl of average size for that age. For three years I went barefoot, never leaving the apartment. My mother worked inventively to try to make my dresses longer and wider to accommodate my growing teenage body, but we never gave a thought to shoes.

By the time of liberation in 1945, though I was only 14, I was tall and full-grown: shoe size eight and a half. I was ready to re-enter normal life, to go to school again, except .

... I had no shoes.

My mother and I had no money at all, and no prospect of getting any in those months immediately following the war. I was so eager to resume school, however, that I went barefoot—which was intensely humiliating, as you might imagine, for a teenage girl. Most nights my dreams, during those difficult months, were about shoes—wearing them, acquiring them through luck or ingenuity, envying them. At one point I was so desperate that I hatched a serious plan: I would convert to Catholicism—surely a kind priest would reward me with shoes. (This was a 14 year old's valiant attempt at problem-solving.)

After many shoeless months my mother contacted, as a last resort, a wealthy gentile woman whose husband was once a friend of my father's. She obtained from her a pair of wooden platform shoes, actually just flat

planks of wood, with nondescript ribbons across the top—a kind of a cross between stilts and geisha shoes. They were so unwearable that I wondered how the woman had been brought so low as to possess them—since even during the war her family had remained affluent. Of course I tried to accommodate my feet to these makeshift things (I was willing to wear anything), but no matter how hard I tried, I always fell out of them after a few steps. Clearly this woman did not have my mother's or my interests at heart.

By November the weather was growing seriously cold, and I was still barefoot. One day, however, my mother came home from work excited. From her odd jobs (helping people sell merchandise in the flea markets) she had finally

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been able to save a little money. We could go to the market and buy shoes. In those post-War days, there were no real stores. All goods were sold in outdoor yards resembling today's flea markets, and most everything was second-hand.

Scouring the stands, I finally came to a stop in front of a pair of men's black shoes: size 10. This was it, I decided.

My mother protested, but to no avail. I was afraid that my feet would continue to grow, and I needed shoes that would last forever. Who knew if we might ever have enough money to buy another pair? After some haggling, my mother paid for them, and I walked home the happiest person in the world, carrying my shoes in my hands.

These shoes had to be saved only for school and special occasions (parties, dances, movies—we were teenagers, we tried very hard to “catch up,” to lead normal lives). I polished them regularly. So that they wouldn't fall off my feet, I carefully lined the sides and bottoms of the shoes with folded cardboard, and stuffed the tips with rags. Still, they were so huge that I had to drag my feet; if I lifted them, the shoes would fall off. Nevertheless I felt like a ballerina.

Unfortunately, my joy was short-lived. After only a few days with my precious new acquisition I was diagnosed as having a serious joint disease in my feet and legs—a consequence of my many years of shoelessness. I was bedridden for several months. I contracted rheumatic fever with high temperatures; for weeks I had to crawl about on all fours to move around in our small apartment. My beautiful shoes lay next to the bed.

It took me a long time to recuperate (in fact, I've never fully recuperated). Medical conditions were primitive in Poland. I remember having to swallow awful-tasting pills that were so enormous they had to be broken into four pieces, their taste disguised in hunks of bread. My mother, though dreadfully worried, was unable to stay home with me because she had to work.

In time, our conditions improved. We moved many times—through Germany, Poland, Israel. Eventually we crossed the Atlantic. I have had good times and better-than-good times—but I still feel the unflagging need to buy shoes. Regardless of how many overflow from my closets, I always crave more.

I am, in general, a person who is quick to pass judgment on others, but for Imelda Marcos I have not an unkind thought. I am sure that behind all of her closets lined with all of their racks holding all of her shoes—there's a story and an explanation. Perhaps quite different from my own, but a story nonetheless. □

Irene Frisch, once a soldier in the Israeli army, is now a retired librarian living in Teaneck. She has just become a grandmother.

Julie Heifetz: When a Holocaust Writer Teaches About Shoes

Julie Heifetz-Klueh, 45, playwright, poet, non-fiction writer and therapist, is the author of one of the earliest works on hidden children, *Too Young to Remember: Oral History and the Holocaust*. She teaches writing and theatre arts in public high schools in St. Louis. Here is how Heifetz-Klueh would teach Irene Frisch's "Imelda and Me":

I would love to teach this story to high school students who are at risk, kids who come from stressed families, kids with learning problems, students who are identified as having "the cards stacked against them."

Because here is Irene Frisch's story—*she's* a kid at risk. I'd ask my students, "What do the shoes symbolize?" We'd talk about all of Irene's losses—family, home, the out-of-doors, freedom of movement, safety, good food, friends, the ability to speak above a whisper, her own bedroom—how years later it doesn't quite work for Irene to recoup her losses through buying more and more shoes. Why? Because it's not just the shoes she needs to get back, it's so much more.

What's amazing about Irene, though—when you consider how scarred, how depressed, how fixated she might have been, given her years of deprivation—what's amazing is how staggeringly healthy and even jocular she is. So? She's got a lot of shoes! I'd say to my students, "You each have some of your own real problems—how do you handle them? What are your "shoes"?"

The Holocaust represents, at its most fundamental level, the issue of loss—not just the loss of relatives, homes, status, but the loss of YEARS . . . years of education, years of opportunity, of parenting, of security. Irene felt the loss of years so acutely that she couldn't wait to go back to school, even with the humiliation of being barefoot. She couldn't wait, in her words, to be "normal" again, to "catch up." For high school kids at risk, this loss of years could really ring a bell. Irene survived—what do they make of that?

I'd have students read Irene's story to have them understand the Holocaust, too . . . not just their own lives. In order to comprehend the magnitude of such a horror, I'd ask kids to remember major losses of their own. I'd make this a writing exercise. Then I'd say to them, "Take that loss; exaggerate it a billion times—is that a holocaust?"