בס''ד

נפלאות הבריאה

Four Red Sweaters

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Clothing historian stitches together Holocaust history by focusing on ‘women’s work’

Nonfiction ‘Four Red Sweaters’ tells wartime stories of four young Jewish women while examining larger questions such as Nazis’ circular economy and perpetrator psychology

By **RENEE GHERT-ZAND**

Lucy Adlington’s new work of narrative nonfiction traces the fates of four red sweaters and the teenagers and young women who either made or wore them during the Holocaust.
Charting the sweaters’ journeys allows the clothes historian and author to unravel the chronology of the destruction of European Jewry, from Kindertransports to ghettos to mobile killing centers, to death camps like Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen.

“As a clothes historian, I’m always looking out for mentions of textiles, clothing, and textile skills. I’ve been collating all this information for a couple of decades. I kept noticing more and more details about knitting in wartime and the related ingenuity associated with these ordinary,

unglamorous woolly sweaters… just ordinary things that don't [usually] survive," Adlington said in an interview from her office in York, England.

In her last book, "The Dressmakers of Auschwitz," readers entered into the fashion salon in Auschwitz, where 25 young talented inmates were forced to create beautiful garments for elite Nazi women. They hoped designing, cutting, and sewing would save them from the gas chambers. Adlington's new book focuses on a related but different aspect of clothes history — knitting and everyday woolen items and their significance during the Holocaust.

Published on March 18 and quickly a New York Times bestseller, "Four Red Sweaters: Powerful True Stories of Women and the Holocaust" is an extensively researched yet highly readable book with a unique perspective. It highlights lesser-known aspects like the then-common "women's work" of knitting as a means of survival and physical and spiritual resistance, as well as the Nazis' recycling and upcycling economy that forced slave laborers to unravel murdered victims' clothing and skillfully transform them into warm wear for camp commandants, their families, and Wehrmacht soldiers.

"I kept a file full of woolly gloves and mittens, jumpers, and things that people knitted in displaced persons camps or took with them from ghettos. And I just created this gallery of garments linked with Holocaust survival. But it was always the red. I kept coming back to red," Adlington said.

In her book, the four red sweaters are associated with Jochewet (Jock) Heidenstein, Chana Zumerkorn, Regina Feldman, and Anita Lasker. The sweaters worn by Heidenstein, Lasker, and Zumerkorn survived the war. The first two are now at the Imperial War Museums (IWM) in London. Zumerkorn's was donated to Yad Vashem in Jerusalem by her brother

Joseph. It is unknown who received and wore the red sweater that Feldman was forced to knit at Sobibor.

The following interview was edited for length and clarity.

The story of Jock Heidenstein and her younger sisters Rita and Gisela (Stella), who escaped Berlin to England on Kindertransports in 1939, features prominently in the book. All three girls had the same red sweater bought for them by their parents in Berlin, but only Jock kept hers and eventually donated it to IWM. Why did you emphasize this family to such a degree?

I don't have any personal connection with them. So, somebody might say, why have you taken this family into your heart? I think it is because they were just an ordinary family that no one had heard of. I was sure that people would want to read of Regina Feldman and her participation and escape in the inmates' revolt in Sobibor, because it's extraordinary. They would also want to read about cellist Anita Lasker, an Auschwitz Women's Orchestra member who became very well-known in the UK after the war. Lately, I've been doing talks related to the book's launch, and I focus on the Heidenstein family the most.

I wasn't able to speak with Jock, but it was possible to recover elements of her life as a refugee. The other jumpers are associated with girls and women who didn't get out [of Europe before the war's outbreak], so looking at Jock's sweater and story is like looking at what might have been for the others.

You mentioned many times in the book that nearly all girls and women in the first half of the 20th century knew how to knit. This skill helped you tell Holocaust history from the female perspective. Why is that so important?

For all my career, I've focused on women's perspectives and evidence of women's lives because they are overlooked… Women's stories aren't documented so much. So many traditional sources are [more male-oriented], like genealogies, documents, and archives. We associate war with men and the military and tanks and metal things. So, looking at women's wartime lives through a traditional female skill and textiles is powerful.

[The fact] that so little knitwork survives seems representative of the reality that so little is fully known about women's [experiences historically]. The domestic sphere isn't as documented, and the domestic life is what was so thoroughly destroyed in the Holocaust. I know businesses and buildings were stolen, but just that sense of your ordinary, lovely domestic family life being utterly obliterated… People still tried to hold on to it by continuing domestic skills. I think garments have stories. They hold memories. And that's very relevant to gathering fragments of Holocaust history.

You used a lot of metaphoric knitting language in the book. Was that deliberate?

I didn't want to be twee about it, but, for example, the use of the phrase "close-knit" was fascinating to me when I stopped to think about what we mean by close-knit community. In the Holocaust, that's what unraveled. I had wanted to call the book "Unraveled" because that is what happened to people's lives, and then they had to knit them up again. So I think words like that were interesting. I was fascinated by the idea that with knitting, you create something from a single thread, and then you're binding it up to make a fabric. And that seemed quite similar to writing a book, although you're pulling on lots of different threads through your research.

The language also came from my being so saturated in this topic. It became part of my mental vocabulary. I have archives full of antique knitting patterns and all these objects. So, it became very much part of how I was working.

Can you say a few words about how you used the production of knitwear in the ghettos and camps to examine perpetrator psychology?

You can take something as banal as knitting as a new way of exploring perpetrator psychology. The exploitative interdependence, where the perpetrators were dependent on the people they were persecuting, proved they were fallible human beings and could not get away with just saying they were born evil monsters.

This was a world where people were told that Jews were polluting and parasites, and yet their garments were being refashioned and sent out to the Wehrmacht, who literally fought in socks knitted by Jews. There's the hypocrisy of that. [The Nazis] commanding Regina Feldman to hand-knit one sock a day [or be killed] were not monsters or inhuman. No — their actions were those of human beings. These men needed their clothes washed, their socks knitted, a new woolly jumper, and gifts to take home for their children. This grounded them as human beings. This gave great accountability to the perpetrators.

What intrigued you the most about the stories of each of the four girls and their sweaters?

With Jock it was the silence. It was the fact that she didn't talk about her experiences but that she donated her jumper [to IWM] towards the end of her life to an exhibition. It was interesting that the jumper speaks for her.

I had the opportunity to speak with Anita, and she is a force to be reckoned with. She's a great speaker and educator, and her intelligence and strength of character struck me. I know most people who write about Anita's life focus on her music, but since I'm not musical, I focused on the knitting aspect [and the red sweater she stole in Auschwitz, wore in Bergen-Belsen, and kept after the war].

The poignancy of Chana Zumerkorn's story [who was murdered at Chelmno and the only one of the four girls not to have survived] is that I know so little… I was hampered in some aspects of my research on her. The testimony given by her brother to Yad Vashem tells how she selflessly gave him her red sweater to keep him warm — and to remember her by — as he prepared to flee Lodz, Poland, for the Soviet Union. Her brother kept the sweater with him throughout the war and later put it away at his home in Israel. He never told anyone about it until he donated it to Yad Vashem. That broke the silence on this very moving story of sibling love.

Regina was involved in one of the most dramatic and gripping events of the Holocaust. However, what stood out from her story was her mother's love. When the camp commandant demanded, "Who can knit?" when they arrived at the camp, Regina's mother, Golda, pushed her forward, thinking it might be a chance to save her daughter's life.

Was it intuition? I don't know. Maybe it was luck.

Regina wrote about her escape and the revolt, but when she gave talks, she focused so much on how she felt her mother's love was always with her, even when her mother had been killed.