

Lucy Adlington
and Mrs Kohut
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A BRIEF HISTORY OF



Lucy Adlington

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Adlington's work at
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Lucy Adlington's love of clothes, performing, collecting and writing has led her to a fascinating life as a fashion historian, writer and speaker. As she says herself, "That's a lot of love", and her passion for all these areas is evident in her wide-ranging work. Realising the power objects have to reveal history, whilst studying for her MA in Medieval Studies, Lucy established a historical theatre company that offered new and exciting ways to present history. As her knowledge of the social history of the performers' clothes grew, so did her incredible historical clothing collection.

Together with two colleagues, Lucy runs History Wardrobe, presenting engaging costume-in-context presentations at venues across the UK and online. Her extensive historical research has enabled her to not only provide compelling talks on the history of clothes and the people who made them, but to also write a range of insightful fiction and non-fiction books. Her novel *The Red Ribbon*, a fictional account of the lives of the dressmakers of Auschwitz, led family members of the real dressmakers of Auschwitz to contact her to share their stories. Incredibly, Adlington was able to meet one of the surviving dressmakers to hear her story. It was through these meetings with the 98-year-old survivor, along with input from the dressmakers' families and her many years of research that Adlington could write the New York Times top 10 bestselling non-fiction work, *The Dressmakers of Auschwitz*.

THE TRUE STORY OF THE WOMEN WHO SEWED TO SURVIVE

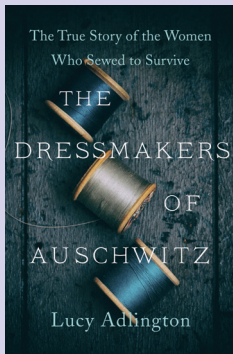
It seems almost impossible to believe. Amidst the utter horror of the atrocities taking place in the infamous Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, existed an elite fashion studio. Here, 14-year-old Rózsika Weiss, affectionately called The Little Hen, fetched pins and snipped

The

DRESSMAKERS

of Auschwitz

*Michelle Rowley explores
the hidden sewing history of
Auschwitz with best-selling author
and historian Lucy Adlington*



ABOUT THE BOOK

The Dressmakers of Auschwitz by Lucy Adlington, £20
www.hodder.co.uk



Mrs Kohut.
© Lucy Adlington

threads for a team of young seamstresses producing high-quality garments and beautiful eveningwear. Yet this was a fashion workshop like no other. The seamstresses were all prisoners of the camp; their customers were the Nazi's upper crust and the wives of SS guards and officers. The dressmakers, whilst malnourished, sick and treated as sub-human, worked arduously to sew two garments a week each. An opportunity to dress the enemy increased their small chance of survival. Their payment was living another day.

Hedwig Höss, wife of the camp's commandant, lived a life of luxury in her villa and garden, which she described as 'paradise'. Her paradise was adjacent to the living hell of the camp just over the wall. Her remark one day that she urgently required someone to refashion a collection of fur pieces into a coat would ultimately change the course of 25 prisoners' lives. On hearing Hedwig's demand, prisoner Marta Fuchs – a Slovak Jewish dressmaker and excellent pattern cutter brought to Hedwig's house as a domestic servant – announced that she could do the upcycling project. Her successful completion of the refashion saw Marta become a full-time seamstress to the Höss household. Working in the villa's attic, Marta worked on alterations for the Höss family. The clothing she reworked to meet Hedwig's requirements came from the plundered goods of the camp's prisoners.

The Kanada warehouses at the camp comprised of 30 55-metre-long barracks filled to the brim with a wide variety of sorted goods. Goods taken from the

suitcases of the innocent arrivals, suitcases filled with clothes and trade tools for the new lives the owners believed they were heading for. Whilst the hundreds of thousands of prisoners were stripped of all their belongings and left with nothing, the Nazi regime profited from selling the prisoners' property on a huge scale. Meanwhile, Hedwig could take her pick of the goods at the warehouses, with no payment required.

On one of Marta's 'shopping' visits to Kanada to gather supplies for Hedwig, she met Bracha and Katka Berkovič, Jewish Slovakian sisters sewing for the SS in one of the barracks. Marta convinced Hedwig to recruit Bracha and Katka and, over time, other seamstresses in the camp to sew for her. This growing band of dressmakers became The Upper Tailoring Studio, led by Marta as their kapo. Marta used this leadership position to recruit as many prisoners as she could to the salon, knowing that the opportunity to be moved from other areas of the camp to the studio offered each dressmaker a lifeline.

In The Upper Tailoring Studio, although still starving, the women could talk and were given clean clothes. Furthermore, the meaningful work helped the women to be more than just a number. For some, such as Irene Reichenberg – a dressmaker from Bratislava who was bereft from the death of her sisters – it moved their thoughts away from suicide and gave them hope. "Sewing saved my life." reflected Hunya Volkmann, another accomplished dressmaker at the studio. "We were like

“*Meaningful work helped the women to be more than just a number*”



Marta Fuchs.
© Juraj Minarik



Present-day Auschwitz





Hunya Volkmann.
© Gila Kornfeld-Jacobs



A selection of garments from Auschwitz

family, united in sorrow and joy,” she recalled.

Bracha Berkovič understood that securing a position in The Upper Tailoring Studio was not always down to sewing skills alone. “Out of the 10,000 women in Birkenau, there were definitely at least 500 good seamstresses, but if they didn’t have any contacts, they didn’t have any luck.” Once the dressmakers found their way to the Upper Tailoring Studio, they worked under pressure to ensure they would not be sent back to worse conditions in the camp or meet their death. The Upper Tailoring Studio was not only a haven and a lifeline for the dressmakers but also a hub of resistance, despite the huge risk this posed to their position. “In our Sewing Commando we pilfered everything we could to transmit it to those who needed it most.” noted Alida Delasalle, one of the two French resistance prisoners who were dressmakers in the salon. Clothing can play a key role in acts of resistance such as offering life-saving warmth, disguise and hiding places. Small acts could make big differences. “Resistance is always worthwhile, while passivity means death.” said Herta Mehl, who lodged with the dressmakers.

The sight of the young dressmakers hand-sewing round a large table greeted the SS Officers’ wives on their arrival at The Upper Tailoring Studio. The SS clients could then peruse fashion magazines to help them decide on their design choices for their desired garments. Marta would sketch the design and

together with Borishka, another talented cutter, she created the pattern pieces for the garments. Under the watchful eye of a guard, she would then go to Kanada to choose fabric, trimming and notions. All of which, as well as the Frister & Rossmann, Pffaf and Singer sewing machines, had once been packed for fateful journeys by other dressmakers and tailors.

After making up toiles from calico, the dressmakers worked with beautiful silk and soft cotton and enhanced garments with smocking, embroidery, piping and braiding. Much of the work was done by hand, particularly the fine finishing. They created beauty amidst grotesque conditions and actions. Fittings needed to take place; a tense experience in which the overfamiliarity of the situation could be an uncomfortable reminder for the client that the prisoners were human beings.

Whilst the dressmakers of The Upper Tailoring Studio started with different levels of dressmaking skills, they all gained the reputation of elite professionals. For the SS officers’ wives only the best would do, meaning only fine-quality work ever left the studio. “The sewing room produced not only beautiful everyday wardrobes, but also elegant evening gowns, the kind of which the SS ladies would probably not have imagined in their wildest dreams.” remarked Hunya Volkmann. For some of the dressmakers that survived, their sewing skills continued to provide a lifeline after escaping Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1945, such as the dressmaker who used

her sewing skills as payment to hide in a Polish woman’s shed after fleeing the death march. For the surviving dressmakers, the sewing skills that had helped them to survive the camp now enabled the women to build their lives back up again. Now they would be paid for their highly skilled work.

Undoubtedly, the dressmakers’ sewing skills played a pivotal role in their ability to survive the almost impossible, but it was their individual mental strength and beautiful bonds of friendships that ultimately strengthened their chances of survival. Lucy Adlington’s *The Dressmaker’s of Auschwitz* plays an important role in ensuring their names, experiences and memories live on in a testament to the dressmakers’ bravery, skills and resilience.

“Resistance is always worthwhile”



ABOUT MICHELLE ROWLEY

Michelle is a sewing teacher, writer, maker and passionate reader. Follow her latest dressmaking accomplishments on Instagram [stitchywhitney](#)