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A selection of handbags designed by Holocaust survivor Judith Leiber. Five hundred of her bags will be on display this year at The Leiber Collection, her museum in East Hampton; the exhibit will open on May 25 and run through Labor Day weekend.

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Holocaust Survivor to Fashion Icon

The incredible story of Judith Leiber, handbag designer extraordinaire

By MELISSA JACOBS

“Hitler put me in the handbag business.” So Judith Leiber is quoted in Enid Nemy’s 1995 biography, *Judith Leiber: The Artful Handbag*, and it is what she continues to believe today: Were it not for the advent of World War II and the Nazis’ persecution and murder of the Jews — if she hadn’t thwarted the Germans’ plan to obliterate her — Leiber would not have become the world-renowned handbag designer and fashion icon she is and has been for decades. The fashion house she founded, Judith Leiber, celebrates its 50th anniversary this year.

Where others see grit and talent, Leiber sees luck. “So many Hungarian Jews died during the war, but my family, we had luck again and again,” said Leiber, now 92, in an interview conducted at her home in New York. Her voice is rich with a Hungarian accent undiluted by her many years in the U.S. “In Budapest my parents, especially my father, did one thing and then another to keep us safe — or as safe as we could be when everyone wanted to kill us.”

This woman who cheated death went on to celebrate life in her work, most famously in her design of handbags in the shape of animals and vegetables, adorned with shimmering crystal. Her bags are works of art; that they hold keys and lipstick, smartphones and gum is a bonus.

Leiber’s frame bags have graced the arms of U.S. first ladies, and her clutches have glittered in the hands of Hollywood A-listers as they sauntered across red carpets in Los Angeles, Cannes and New York. Examples of her work are on permanent display in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Smithsonian Institute, the Museum of Modern Art and London’s Victoria and Albert Museum. And then there’s her own special place: the Leiber Museum, at her summer home in East Hampton, N.Y., in which hundreds of her bags are on display for her fans to see.

Leiber is one of those rare fashion stars who become pop culture icons. Evidence of this is the fact that her bags made prominent cameo appearances in the films *Sex and the City* and *The Devil Wears Prada*, celebrated for their impact on the fashion world.

Leiber the designer has a thing for crystal; Leiber the woman is made of steel. She survived the



German’s mostly successful effort to eviscerate Hungarian Jewry and the famously harsh Soviet occupation of Budapest. She came to the U.S. where she reached the pinnacle of a field dominated by men,



without compromising her integrity and belief in her talent. And she refused to compromise her sense of self by Anglicizing her name, remaining true to the identity for which she had been persecuted. With Gerson Leiber, her husband of 67 years, she generously supports many charities in Israel. Perhaps that is because she carries with her a deep awareness that when her family needed to escape the Nazis, they had nowhere to go.

Born Judith Peto in Budapest, in 1921, Leiber was raised in an upper-middle-class home in which education was a top priority. Her Vienna-born mother, Helene, was a homemaker who cared for Leiber and her sister Eva. Her father Emil was a commodities broker who

traveled frequently for business. “Very often, he brought handbags home for my mother,” Leiber

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“So many Hungarian Jews died during the war, but my family, we had luck again and again,” said Leiber, now 92, in an interview conducted at her home in New York.

remembers. “It turned into a large collection from all of the cities he traveled to. I loved them.”

The Petos were Jewish but not particularly observant. “We had a *sefer*,” Leiber says, “but with bread on the side. It didn’t matter how religious we were, because to the outside world, a Jew is a Jew.”

Leiber excelled academically; she speaks five languages and has always had a good head for numbers. So well did she do that her parents wanted her to attend one of the best universities in Europe, London’s King’s College.

“My parents wanted me to study chemistry because I had an aunt in Romania who did that, so we knew that it could be an exciting career for women,” Leiber explains.

Was she interested in chemistry? No, she says. “But my mother thought I would be good at it.” So Leiber packed her bags and went off to London. At that point in her life, her parents’ every wish was her command.

When Hitler came to power in Germany, in 1933, and Hungary, like other East European countries, commenced enacting their own anti-Jewish laws, the Petos got nervous, though not so nervous that they considered leaving the country. But by 1938, Hungary had established an alliance with the Nazis. The government soon issued increasingly restrictive laws against its Jewish citizens.



“Things got worse as Hitler got more power,” Leiber says. “My father wanted to come to America. My cousin was a Swiss Jew, but he was taking care of his in-laws and said that he couldn’t help us. Just before I came home from London on my break from school, in 1939, [I learned that I] could go to Australia for 25 British pounds. But we didn’t know anything about that place. My parents also thought that maybe I could get out through

Greece, but then what would happen to me? So I didn’t go.”

Leiber didn’t return to London, either. “I decided that I wanted to stay with my family because it was getting too dangerous,” Leiber says. “But even so, my father thought the war would be over fast. We would say, ‘Who would listen to a maniac like Hitler? Someone will stop him.’”

In 1939, Hungary arrested thousands of Jews and sent them to labor camps. More than 35,000 Jews were forced into the Hungarian Second Army. Almost all would perish.

In territories annexed by Hungary, 20,000 Jews with Polish and Soviet citizenship were turned over to the Nazis. But for several years, the country’s leader, Miklos Horthy, did not round up all Jews, despite pressure from the Nazis and Arrow Cross, Hungary’s fascist political party.

That changed when Horthy began secret peace negotiations with the Allies. In response, the Nazis invaded Hungary in March of 1944. The Jews were no longer safe. “In a way, we were lucky that, if they were going to come at all, that they came later in the war,” Leiber says.

But time and experience had turned the Nazis into an incredibly efficient killing machine. In just eight weeks, 437,000 Hungarian Jews were sent to Auschwitz. Only the Jewish community in Budapest remained.

“We were very lucky because we moved into a building protected by the Swiss government,” Leiber explains. “My father had some official papers, and then he got a typewriter and forged some names on the papers. ... The building we were in was a Jewish community house, and if we hadn’t gone there, we would have been deported.”

Did her family know about the concentration camps? “Oh, yes, we knew,” says Leiber. “A Slovak who said that he escaped from Auschwitz came back home [and told us about it]. We were afraid of being sent there, but what could you do? It was too late to go anywhere.”

In the Jewish community center protected by the Swiss government, the Leibers lived in a one-bedroom apartment they shared with 26 other people. “We all slept on the floor and ate whatever we could get,” Leiber says. “We stayed in the apartment all day; it wasn’t safe outside.” As Leiber told *Moment* magazine, young Jewish women caught on the streets were often forced to become sex slaves for the

Nazis. Leiber, then 23, took no chances ... until her father was taken to a labor camp.

"They picked him up off the street," she explains, "and took him to a camp to do hard labor. When we found out what happened, I went to the Swiss consulate and showed them the [forged] papers to say that a mistake had been made." Amazingly, Leiber convinced the Swiss to take action, and her father was removed from the labor camp and returned to the Jewish community house.

In October 1944, with the Soviet army approaching, the Arrow Cross killed thousands of Budapest Jews on the banks of the Danube River and forced tens of thousands to march hundreds of miles towards the Austrian border. One month later, the Arrow Cross ordered Budapest's remaining Jews — approximately 70,000 people — into an area totaling 0.1 square miles. Among them were Leiber and her family. "Terrible, terrible, terrible," is how Leiber describes the weeks she spent in the ghetto. "Sometimes, you had to remind yourself that you were lucky to be alive. It didn't always feel like that was a good thing."

Not that the Soviet arrival meant salvation. A month-long battle for Budapest ensued, during which no one was safe. By April 1945, the Red army had driven the Nazis and Arrow Cross out of Budapest. Eventually, Leiber and her family moved back into their apartment, which had been occupied by Red Army troops. Food was scarce, the city was in ruins and the future was, to put it mildly, uncertain.

So Judith Leiber started making handbags.

Before the war, Leiber had worked with Pessl, one of the premier handbag makers in Budapest. The company's first

female apprentice, she worked her way up to journeyman and, eventually, master. But Pessl disappeared with the war, its owners murdered in a concentration camp. After



Budapest was liberated, Leiber returned to her craft. But then she met Gerson (Gus) Leiber, an American G.I. from Titusville, Pa., who was stationed in Budapest. The two fell in love and wanted to marry. "My parents were against the marriage," Leiber says. "Their complaint was that Gus was poor and [that] I didn't know anything about him."

But having faced down the Nazis and endured Soviet bombings — not to mention becoming a master craftsman in a field dominated by men — Leiber, then 24 years old, wasn't about to take no for an answer. "I said, 'That's fine, you don't have to be part of this. But I'm doing it.'"

The couple married in 1946 and quickly left Hungary. By 1947, they were living in the Bronx, N.Y. Leiber was a wife, but she had no intention of becoming a housewife. She went straight to work in the handbag industry, taking any job she could get. "I started working for a 'five dollar' company and someone said I should leave because it's not right for someone who knows what you know about the craft," she

says. "I went to the union man and he said, 'I'll send you to the best place in New York and see if you make it.' Not only did I make it but the head guy there got sick and I was good enough to take his job.

"From there, I worked at the mid-level and then the best houses," Leiber says. "I worked for Nettie Rosenstein for 12 years, and that was where I got my first big break."

It came courtesy of Mamie Eisenhower. "Nettie got commissioned to make the inauguration dress for Mrs.

'In Budapest, my parents ... did one thing and then another to keep us safe — or as safe as we could be when everyone wanted to kill us.'

Eisenhower, and a bag was needed go with it. I made that." Leiber explains. "It turned out that she loved the bag."

Mrs. Eisenhower began what soon became a tradition among first ladies.

From Lady Bird Johnson through Laura Bush, with the exception of Rosalynn Carter, every first lady carried a Judith Leiber bag to an inaugural ball.

How does one work with a first lady?

"The dress comes first," Leiber explains. "For Mrs. Johnson, Adele Simpson made the dress. Then Mrs. Johnson picked from the collection a gold bag that I made.

"For Mrs. Nixon, we made a silk bag in the color that matched her dress.

"Mrs. Reagan, I made two bags for her. The first one was a little cream one with side pockets, very pretty in white satin. The second was an envelope-style that I designed just for her; she loved it. It was so funny — I got a telephone call from her one day. She said, 'Judy, somebody spilled coffee on my bag and there is a stain. Can you fix it?' Can you imagine, spilling coffee on the first lady's handbag? But there was nothing I could do about the stain. I made another one that was exactly the same and sent it. We kept that stained bag as a memento, but the company tried to find it years later and couldn't.

"I also made a bag for Mrs. Bush Number One," says Leiber. "The designer [Arnold Scaasi] gave me the fabric. I made it into a classic style, a frame bag. She invited everyone who did work on her inaugural dress to lunch at the White House. That was lovely. Gus and I went.



"Mrs. Clinton, I made her two bags," Leiber continues. "The first wasn't used. The woman who made Mrs. Clinton's dress [Sarah

Phillips] made her a bag. The second one was made of rhinestones to match her dress. I also made her an alligator bag, and a little leather bag for her daughter.

"For the second Mrs. Bush, I did a bag that I originally made in 1973. It was inspired by a Tiffany window in the Met. She was very happy with that, but they never took a photograph with it. She sent me a note that she was sorry that there wasn't a photo.

"Can you believe that no one made the call to Mrs. Obama to offer her a bag?" Leiber sighs. "What a missed opportunity." By the time President Obama took office, she and her husband had sold the fashion house, which was grossing a reported \$74 million a year — from handbag sales alone. The company, which has since branched into eyewear, belts, perfume and other product, continues to bear Judith Leiber's name.

"But we started from nothing, absolutely nothing, in a small loft at 20 West 33rd Street in New York," Leiber says. "We moved to 31st Street [to a space with] 7,000 square feet and stayed there for 30 years. All of the work was done in that factory, right in New York. Many other companies sent the work out

to Asia or South America, but not us. My bags were made in America by skilled craftsmen. That is what the people pay for: quality."

Judith Leiber quality.

Melissa Jacobs is the editor of Bridges, the South Jersey supplement of the Philadelphia Jewish Exponent.

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Leiber Collection celebrates Judith's history of handbag design

The best fashion accessories are often described as works of art. And if art is at home in a museum, it is fitting that Judith Leiber's handbags have their own museum, The Leiber Collection, in East Hampton. Leiber's husband, Gerson, urged her to establish just such a museum, which was built on the Leiber's home property in 2006. It has been open to the public for the past six years.

Like a painter seeking to buy back works sold long ago, the couple had to collect handbags they had created dating back a half century in order to populate the exhibit. It was in 1963 that Gerson, a National Academy of Design member whose abstract expressionist paintings hang in insti-

tutions such as the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, D.C., and the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, told his wife, "We will start our own company."

Fortunately, there were plenty of Judith Leiber bags around to reclaim. She recently told this newspaper, "We were selling 25,000 bags a year." So it was not surprising that the couple could acquire many of Leiber's high-end bags through auction houses such as Christie's and Sotheby's, in addition to the more prosaic venue of eBay.

"We have a thousand bags," said Judith. The number on display in the museum has varied, but this year,

she added, "500 will be on display" in recognition of the 50th anniversary of the founding of Judith Leiber Handbags. The exhibit is entitled "Judith Leiber, An American Journey: From Artisan to Fashion Icon" and will open on May 25 and run through Labor Day weekend.

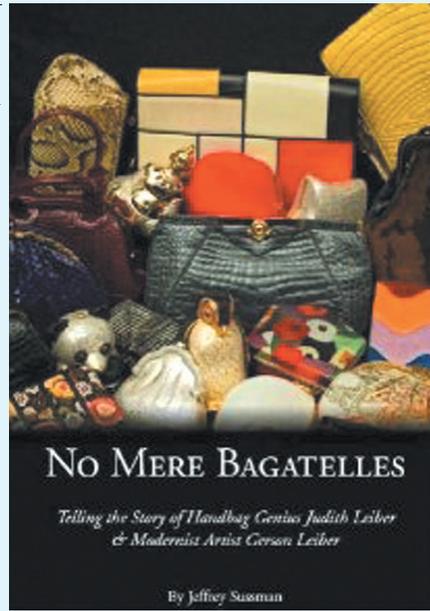
"I made all the patterns for the bags and I examined every single bag," Judith says of her work. "No bag was ever shipped out that wasn't perfect." As eminent designer Geoffrey Beene has stated, Judith's bags are *objets d'art*, not just fine pieces of craftsmanship, and as such have been exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art and other distinguished

No Mere Bagatelles, by Jeffrey Sussman, tells the story of Judith and Gerson Leiber.

institutions. Moreover, her enormous popularity assured the couple that if they built the museum, people would come.

The Leiber Collection, 446 Old Stone Highway, Springs, East Hampton, is open to the public, free of charge, every summer from Memorial Day to Labor Day, on Sundays, 1 p.m.-4 p.m. For more information, call 631.329.3288, email info@leibercollection.org, or visit www.leibercollection.org.

—Jerry Cimisi



NO MERE BAGATELLES

Telling the Story of Handbag Genius Judith Leiber & Modernist Artist Gerson Leiber

By Jeffrey Sussman