

THE RED DRESS

Maria Odessky Rosen



Paul Cézanne, *Madame Cézanne in a Red Dress*, c. 1889

image credits

MY PARENTS WERE traitors. When they sewed my mother's red wool dress in 1984, they became part of the Resistance. By then they had been out of work for seven years, fired from their government jobs because they had applied to leave Russia. Branded as traitors to the Motherland, they could never hope to obtain another job in the country they had betrayed. This would have been tolerable for them if they had been allowed to leave, but it would be another year before the Soviet Union finally let its people go. And since we all had to eat before that life-changing day finally came, my parents were forced to become creative and even a little criminal.

My mom was a piano teacher and was able to make a little money teaching some neighborhood kids privately. My father got odd jobs restoring cupolas of old churches, which he loved doing. Unfortunately, these businesses were inconsistent and part time. My parents wracked their brains, trying to come up with a way they could have a more steady source of income to support the three of us. At the time, they had no idea whether or not the Soviets would ever let us go. And so, after much thinking and talking, they decided to invest in a wool sewing machine. It was the size of a piano keyboard and came with various attachments they could use to create novel designs. This was way before you could look up how to

do almost anything on YouTube or TikTok, so they read the instructions and practiced—a lot. They made knitted dresses and shirts and sweaters and skirts and anything else people would pay for. They bought their wool and sold the clothes on the black market.

I don't remember most of the clothes my parents sewed. I was little, and the clothes didn't stay at our apartment for very long. My parents were really good at designing and making clothes, and they sold out each time. I only remember one dress—the one they made for my mom. It was a red, below-the-knee, A-line dress with a v-neck and beautiful geometric blue patterns on the $\frac{3}{4}$ inch flared sleeves. They made it as soon as they learned that the government was finally allowing people to emigrate, and my mom wore it to celebrate our last New Year's Eve in Russia.

The color red, of course, was the color of the Soviet flag. Red represented workers' blood spilled during their struggle for emancipation. The documentary *Dressing the Resistance* explains the role clothing and fashion have played throughout history as powerful tools of social change. I'm not saying my parents were extremists, like the Russian artist [Petr Pavlensky](#), who sewed his mouth shut to protest the arrest of the Russian activist performers Pussy Riot. But every time I look at my mom's dress hanging in my closet, I don't think their choice of color was accidental. ✍