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A promise at her stepfather's deathbed

Agnes Hirschi from Berne escaped the Holocaust in Hungary as a child – thanks to the Swiss diplomat Carl Lutz, who later became her stepfather. She is now fulfilling her pledge to tell others about what Lutz did in saving her and thousands of others from Nazi brutality.

SUSANNE WENGER

It was winter 1944/45 and a battle was raging in German-occupied Budapest. Every time the air-raid siren sounded, six-year-old Agnes Hirschi held on to her doll and hurried into the dark, dank cellar with her mother. “We never left the cellar for two months after Christmas, because it was no longer safe at ground level,” she recalls. Hirschi is now 85 and lives near Berne. She is one of over 20 people profiled in a new book called “The Last Swiss Holocaust Survivors”. But what happened to her was different to the stories of those who survived the concentration camps. “I was lucky, because my mother and I found refuge,” she says.

It was diplomat Carl Lutz, Swiss Vice-Consul in Budapest from 1942 to 1945, who gave them refuge – and whose memory Hirschi wants to keep alive most of all. The cellar was at Lutz’s own address, where little Agnes and her mother Magda Grausz were housed in the staff quarters. Magda, a young Hungarian Jew, was employed as housekeeper at the Swiss embassy. It was thanks to this working relationship that Lutz was able to protect her and her daughter from persecution by the Nazis and Hungarian fascists. Lutz became Agnes’s stepfather after the war, after he and Magda fell in love and got married in 1949. It was the second marriage for both of them.

Courage in the face of barbarity

The newly-weds moved to Berne with Agnes after the war. Agnes learned German, went to school, completed commercial training, started her own family, worked as a journalist at the “Berner Zeitung”, and later got involved in the Reformed Church. The fact that she came from a Jewish fam-

“I was lucky, because my mother and I found refuge,” says Holocaust survivor Agnes Hirschi, 85.
Photo: Danielle Liniger



ily and had fled the Holocaust in Hungary was a secret she kept to herself for decades. And it was only gradually that she realised the scale of what her stepfather did in Budapest. Lutz not only saved her and her mother but prevented an estimated 50,000 Hungarian Jews from being deported, shot dead or sent on brutal death marches.

In his job at the Foreign Interests Service in the Swiss legation in Buda-

pest, Lutz was responsible for issuing visas to Jews emigrating to Palestine (a British protectorate at the time). He was able to take advantage of this. Following Germany’s invasion of Hungary in March 1944, terrified Jewish men and women gathered in front of the Vice-Consul’s bureau in Budapest, called the “Glass House”. The diplomat was at his wit’s end. What should he do? After wrestling with his conscience for a few days, he



developed a ruse that led to one of the largest civilian rescue operations of Jews during the Second World War.

Difficult homecoming

Lutz and his staff obtained permission to issue letters of protection to 8,000 Jews for emigration to Palestine. Interpreting the 8,000 not as persons, but as families, they issued tens of thousands of additional letters for many more, establishing 76 safe houses for them around Budapest. Lutz was not overtly daring, says Hirschi. “He was introverted and did not talk much.” Instead, the Appenzell-born diplomat was guided by his Methodist faith. Risking so much to deny the Nazis took a lot of out of him. But on returning to Switzerland after the war, all he heard in his home country was sniping and criticism. He was deeply disappointed, his stepdaughter says. But Hungary, the US, Germany, and Israel gave him the credit he deserved.

As Lutz lay on his deathbed in Berne in 1975, embittered and lonely, he asked his stepdaughter to promise that she would tell others about what he did and raise awareness among young people about the horrors of the Holocaust. Since retiring 20 years ago, Hirschi has been fulfilling the pledge she made to Lutz back then. She has travelled far and wide,

giving talks and spreading the message at exhibitions and events at home and abroad. Hirschi has consequently also met some of the people who were saved by her stepdad. In 2018, she and historian Charlotte Schallié published “Under Swiss Protection” – a book that retraces Lutz’s diplomatic wartime rescue efforts through the lens of Jewish eyewitness testimonies.

Talking to school children

It was only shortly before the book came out that Hirschi had also begun telling others about her own personal story. The first time was at an exhibition in Berne. It was a relief after having kept quiet for so long, she says.



“The Last Swiss Holocaust Survivors”

Portraits of Holocaust survivors who found a new life in Switzerland after the war.

Published by the Gamaraal Foundation/ Anita Winter. Stämpfli Verlag, 2023. 96 pages; CHF 30, EUR 39.

Digital exhibition: www.gamaraal.com/exhibition

Switzerland remembers

Switzerland plans to build a national memorial to the victims of the Nazis, after parliament adopted a motion to this effect last year. This spring, the federal government is due to make an initial announcement on how it plans to implement the motion. In addition, there is currently a debate on whether to criminalise the public display of Nazi symbols like the swastika in Switzerland. The National Council Legal Affairs Committee expressed its support for the measure at the beginning of the year. It proposes creating special legislation to this end.

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She has since been able to clear up a few grey areas. For example, she now knows more about her Jewish origins. But she also gets emotional talking about her life. Whenever she visits Swiss schools, she notices how keen the children are to ask her about her experiences. Carl Lutz’s heroics and the history of the Holocaust are of great interest to them, she says. Her work seems to be bearing fruit. “That pleases me.”

Her stepfather, the once forgotten saviour of so many Jews, has finally been honoured in Switzerland too. The federal government formally recognised his humanitarian actions in 1995. In 2018, the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs dedicated a room to him at the Federal Palace, with Agnes Hirschi subsequently attending the inauguration of a commemorative plaque. Hirschi appreciates these efforts. “I only wish my stepfather had still been alive to appreciate them too.” She welcomes the fact that the planned memorial to Swiss Holocaust victims (see box) will also honour compatriots who helped those persecuted by the Nazis. For her part, Hirschi wants to continue informing and educating people – “for as long as I still can”.

Agnes Hirschi owes her life to the Swiss diplomat Carl Lutz. Lutz saved tens of thousands of Jews from persecution and murder. Swiss officialdom was slow to acknowledge his heroism.

Photo: Keystone