The remarkable untold story of the German man who saved a Jewish widow from the Gestapo

During the Second World War, a Jewish widow was sheltered by a German man at huge personal risk. Today their families remain close friends

By Jenny Krausz *and* Martin Kreyssig

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Gertrud Prochownik, a German Jew, was saved from a concentration camp by the

> kindness and courage of a stranger, Lothar Kreyssig. For generations, their families have shared a close bond. Here, their grandchildren - who themselves are the best of friends - tell Gertrud and Lothar's remarkable story for the first time

Gertrud's story

As told by her granddaughter Jenny Krausz, 62, a teacher, who lives with her husband Sean in Brittany

Gertrud, my grandmother – or Omi, as my twin sister and I called her – was a constant presence in our lives until we left home for university. She lived with us and our parents for my whole childhood, and the image of her sitting in her chair, looking out into the garden and reading Der Spiegel magazine, is imprinted on my mind. She gave the best hugs, sang nursery rhymes to us in German and kept a stash of chocolate-covered marzipan for us. She was warm and loving – more tactile than verbal, as her English was poor – but she was happy to chat about everything, with one exception: she never, ever spoke about her past.

I grew up knowing we were Jewish, and about the atrocities that had happened to Jews during the Second World War. I also knew, somehow, that my grandmother had witnessed terrible things during that time. No one sat us down to explain this but it was just known in our family that my grandmother had been forced to run for her life and was harboured by a German judge, Lothar Kreyssig, who hid her on his farm at enormous risk to himself and his family.

Part of the reason I knew this was because the Kreyssigs have been close family friends for as long as I can remember; I met Lothar's grandson, Martin, when I was 15 and he remains one of my best friends. But as my grandmother never discussed the war with me before her death in 1982 – and I was too young and incurious to probe – I didn't know the full extent of what she went through. It was only when my mother died five years ago that we finally understood.

Jenny with Gertrud, her grandmother, known as Omi, in 1966 | CREDIT: Courtesy of Jenny Krausz

One day my sister and I were clearing out her flat and found a bundle of old letters that she and Gertrud had exchanged during the war, along with copies of several letters that Gertrud had sent to her sister, and we decided to have them translated. Reading them was like opening a door to the past; I felt intensely emotional and sometimes quite overwhelmed. Before then we'd had no indication of how Gertrud had felt or her fears, but those letters have helped us understand what she went through.

Gertrud was born and raised in Berlin, the fourth of six children. She married, had a daughter, Marianne (my mother), and trained as a social worker, later working for the Jewish Employment Office. By the time the Second World War broke out in 1939, she was 55 and a widow, her husband having died three years earlier after suffering a brain haemorrhage. Marianne was in England by then. Concerned about the escalating situation, Gertrud had sent her to London a few months after Kristallnacht in 1938 to live with acquaintances and work as a machinist.

Gertrud, however, chose to remain in Berlin, determined to help other Jews leave Germany through her work at the Jewish Community Administration, finding many of them positions overseas. It is likely her work saved many lives.

I feel so proud of Gertrud for making that sacrifice, knowing she might never see her beloved daughter again. As a mother myself, the thought of not seeing my daughter for seven months, never mind seven years, is unbearable, so how she coped is hard to imagine.

Gertrud and her daughter Marianne in 1932 | CREDIT: Courtesy of Jenny Krausz

In one letter dated 1942, Gertrud recounted that her sister and brother-in-law were taken to Auschwitz. 'I ran everywhere seeking help,' she wrote to her other sister, 'but nobody could

do anything… What keeps going through my mind is whether I gave them enough veronal [a barbiturate]. I hope they take it in time.'

Reading this, 80 years on, my grandmother's presence of mind stuns me. Even in that moment of chaos, she had the foresight to supply them with sleeping tablets so that they could end their lives.

Soon after, in April 1943, Gertrud received her own deportation order from the Gestapo and decided to try to escape from Berlin. I have never managed to piece together how she came to hear of Lothar but he was known among the underground network as being anti-Nazi, and willing to help people 'disappear'. He arranged for Gertrud to stay on a farm in Päwesin, 40 miles to the west of Berlin, where she would hide in plain sight under an assumed identity, never telling anyone that she was Jewish.

Gertrud fled Berlin with nothing. To disguise her heritage, she took the name Hildegard Jacobi, and carried only a cyanide tablet; she would have chosen to end her life rather than be taken by the Gestapo. When I picture my middle-aged grandmother on that train, alone, my heart aches for her. She must have felt so lonely and scared. I've thought of her more recently because I am helping a Kurdish family in our village who similarly left everything behind when they ran from their homeland – when the mother talks to me about how much she misses her old life, I think of Gertrud.

Gertrud's granddaughter, Jenny Krausz, photographed at home in 2021 | CREDIT: THOMAS GIRONDEL

In her letters, Gertrud described life on the farm as a miserable existence; she worked 18 hours a day in brutal conditions with two women from fanatical Nazi families, who treated her with suspicion; she lived in fear that they would discover her true identity and report her to the Gestapo. ‘I was afraid of each new day and thought often of taking the cyanide,’ she wrote.

In despair, she contacted Lothar again, and he and his wife Hanna agreed to take her in at their own farm, near the village of Hohenferchesar, 10 miles further west, until the war ended. What is remarkable is that rather than hiding, she lived and worked there, and was simply absorbed into their life. Indeed she was treated as a member of the family, eating with them and spending time with their four children. Her letters describe the great kindness shown to her by the family. Though she had no access to rations, she ate the same food as them and they shared everything with her – after two years of deprivation, she was touched to experience human kindness again.

The atrocities committed during the Second World War changed everything for Gertrud – she could no longer bear to think of herself as German – yet the Kreyssigs, as well as saving her life, helped restore her faith in humanity.

Gertrud | CREDIT: c/o Jenny Krausz and family

After the war, Gertrud left Germany for ever, first going to London to be reunited with Marianne, then relocating to Australia, before returning to London to live with my parents and us. She stayed in touch with Lothar and Hanna throughout her life, exchanging letters with them. She lived to be 97, long enough to see that friendship between our families flourish and grow through the generations.

I first went to stay with the Kreyssigs in Frankfurt when I was learning German as a teenager. Martin and I hit it off immediately. Though he was two years younger than me, and despite our lack of fluency in each other's language, there was an instant rapport. The first thing I saw when I met him was his huge welcoming grin, and I vividly recall the way he made everything an adventure and his great sense of humour.

Almost 50 years later, laughter still rings through our relationship. Our children have met several times, too, so it's likely that that deep connection that began in Nazi Germany 80 years ago, will continue.

Back when we first met, we thought our grandparents were ancient, their pasts irrelevant, so we chatted about school and bands and, later, our mutual passion for the arts, our families and children. After we graduated, I became a picture researcher, and Martin a film director and a professor of film at a German university, so we had plenty in common.

Luckily our respective partners have always got on well, and Martin often used to stay with us when he was in London for work; we'd watch films and visit exhibitions together. Our grandparents' shared history has only become more of a talking point in recent years, particularly since my mother died in 2016 and I found the letters.

That same year, Lothar and Hanna were recognised as Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem, an honour bestowed on non-Jews who saved Jewish lives. The ceremony was held two years later in Berlin, and was attended by both my family and Martin's – it was a very emotional day for all of us, and I only wish our grandparents could have seen us.

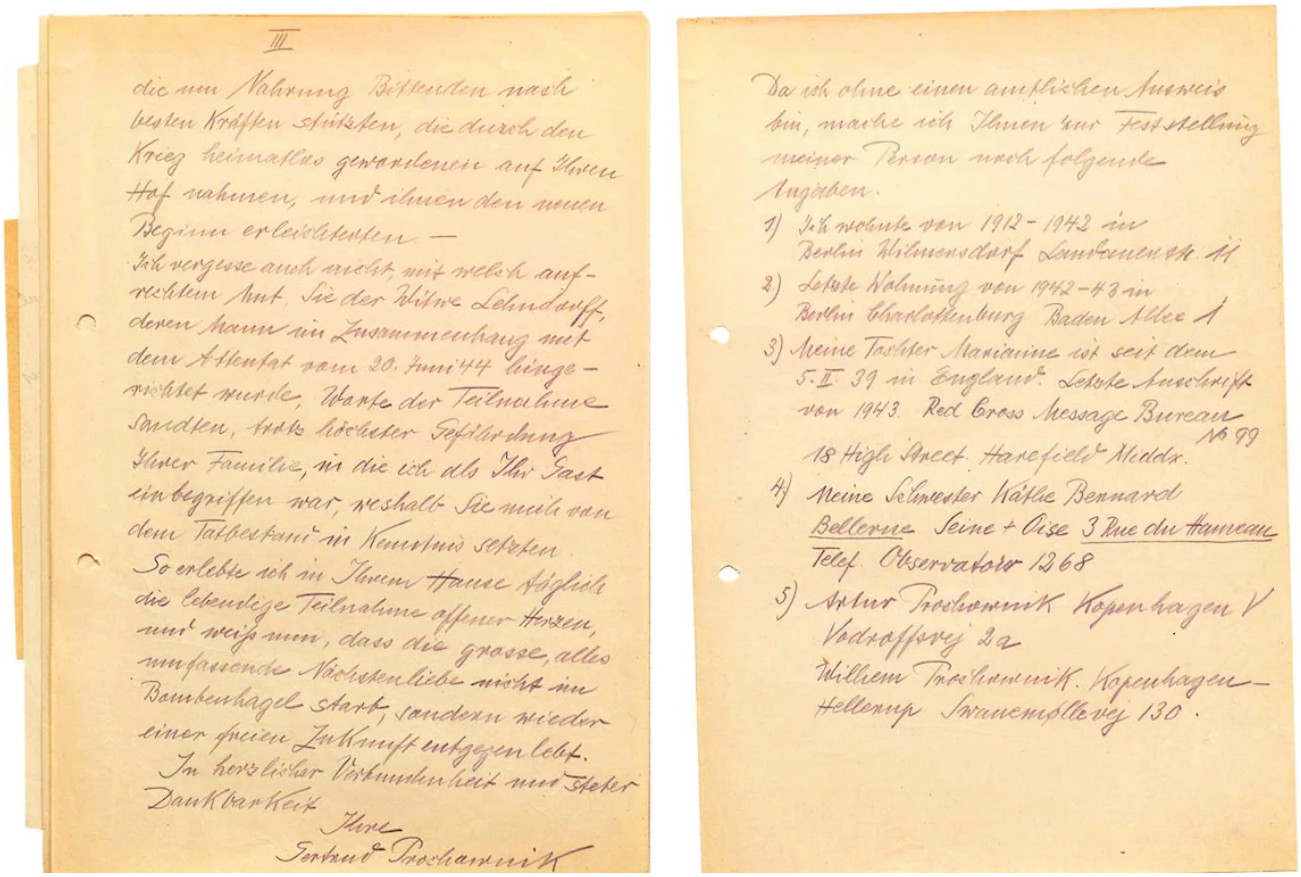
The two families at the Yad Vashem ceremony in 2018 | CREDIT: Ruthe Zuntz/Israeli Embassy in Germany

Today, I often reread my grandmother's precious letters. They bring her back to me – I can almost hear her voice reciting them.

The letter I cherish most was written to the Kreyssigs on 5 May 1945, days before the war ended. I know it almost off by heart, yet it never loses its power to move me to tears.

'In these difficult days, when we don't know what will happen, or how we might get separated, I have a deeply felt need to leave behind me a few pathetic words of thanks to you, my most highly esteemed Kreyssigs,' she wrote.

'You knew the risks you were taking for your whole family, but you helped without hesitation, accepting me into your family. I sat at your table, where everyone was treated with the same love as your own children…



Gertrud's letter of thanks to Lothar | CREDIT: Courtesy of Jenny Krausz

'In your house I experienced open-hearted sympathy and accepted that our capacity for all-embracing love of our fellow humans did not die in the hail of bombs, but lives on into a bright future.'

However many times I reread it, I feel the same mixture of sadness, gratitude, hope and, ultimately, faith that there is goodness in the world. Lothar was a man of great integrity and humanity. In this respect, his grandson is cut from the same cloth.

Lothar's story

As told by his grandson, Martin Kreyssig, a film director and university professor, who lives in Hamburg with his wife Viola

When I met Jenny nearly 50 years ago, I had no idea that I would be gaining another sister, yet that is how I feel about her. Despite being in different countries, we have established a solid friendship that I know will continue until old age, and though neither of us has ever needed sanctuary, as Gertrud did, I know that if one of us did, the other would provide it.

The stories of our two families have always moved me. I asked my grandparents a lot of questions and tried to find out about their experiences of the war, but nothing came from them. In the end, I learnt from my parents that my grandfather had protected Gertrud and another Jewish woman, both of whom were being sought by the Gestapo.

Hanna and Lothar in 1970 | CREDIT: Courtesy of Martin Kreyssig

I find it astonishing that he risked not only his own life but also that of his young family, but what is more astonishing still is that it was not an isolated act of courage or goodness. In 1940, my grandfather, a judge, used his legal training to challenge Aktion T4, the Nazis' euthanasia programme [which saw an estimated 200,000 people murdered]. He also filed a murder charge against the man responsible, Reichsleiter Philipp Bouhler, a senior Nazi official.

Though this charge was rejected – as Bouhler was carrying out Hitler's directives – my grandfather didn't give up. He forbade the asylums in his district from handing over their wards to the Nazis, informing them that the word of the Führer was not law. Criminal proceedings were started against Lothar but they failed – as did a later attempt by the Gestapo to deport him to a concentration camp. His only punishment was dismissal from his post in 1942, which was labelled as 'retirement'.

His was a lone voice within the judiciary but it was a determined and indomitable one that probably saved many lives. In the 1968 Frankfurt-Auschwitz trials, my grandfather was described as an ‘unsung just judge’.

I feel immense pride when I think of how he stood up for those who could not stand up for themselves, particularly given his background. Born in 1898 to a right-leaning bourgeois family in Saxony, he served in World War One before studying law: in theory, he would have made a perfect Nazi yet he resisted all attempts to recruit him.

Lothar was always principled and just, but after he joined the Confessing Church in 1934, he fully devoted himself to God. I believe his faith was the key motivation in all he did to help Gertrud and so many others; this gave him the strength never to waiver, no matter the risks. Indeed it was through the Confessing Church, which opposed Nazi ideology, that Lothar became involved with the underground organisations helping Jewish and other persecuted communities.

Lothar's grandson, Martin Kreyssig | CREDIT: JENS UMBACH

My father, Jochen, was 15 when Gertrud went to live at the family farm and he once told me that she appeared with no announcement, drama or fuss. He didn’t question her presence,

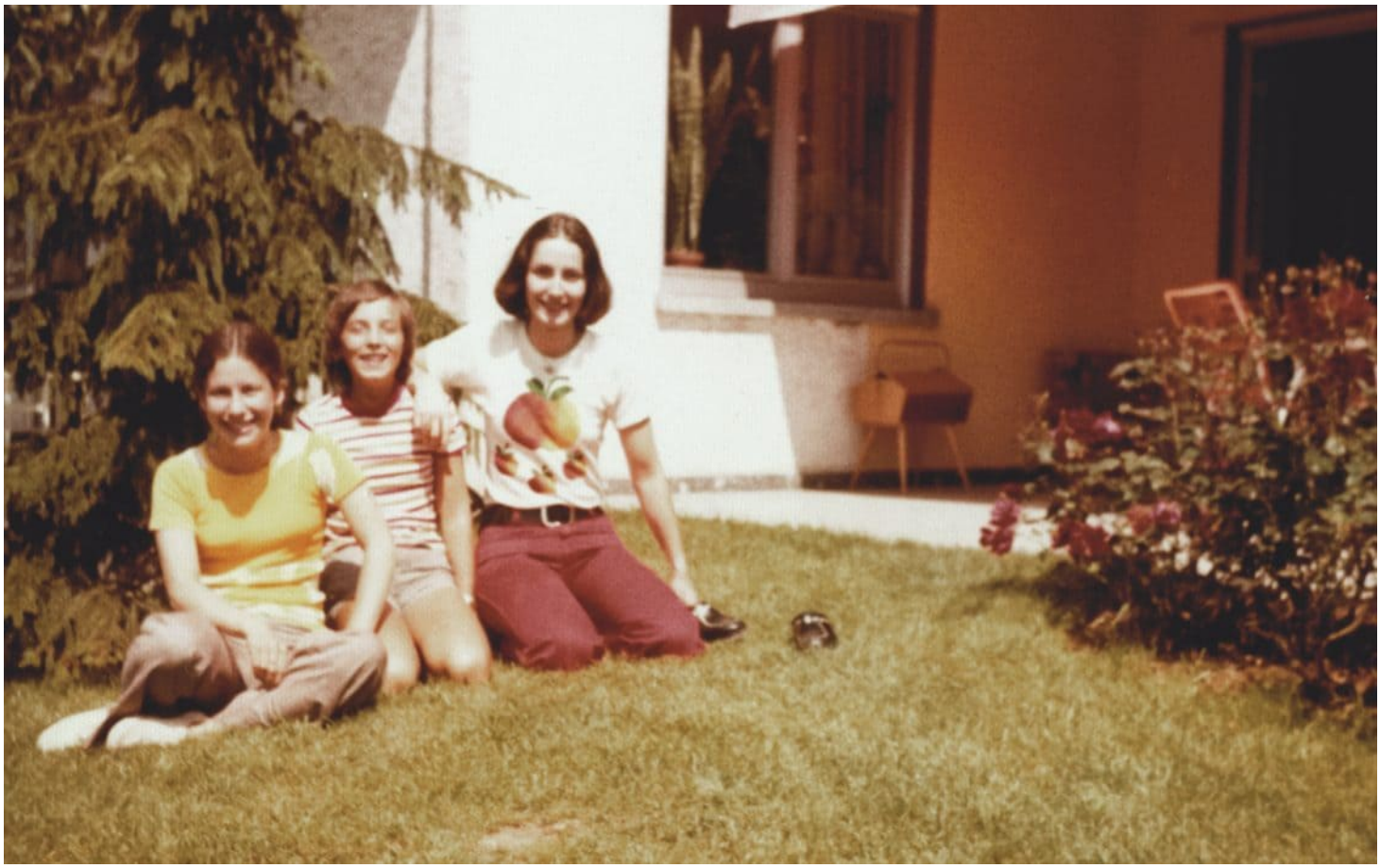
far less understand the danger this posed to his family. To him she simply needed work and shelter. She ate with the family, slept in the house, and worked in the fields. Gertrud first became a part of the community and then, after the war, her family became a part of ours.

The letter she wrote to my grandparents, days before she left them, was later used as a testimonial to prove to the Russian occupation forces that Lothar had not profited from the war and had always acted with humanity.

My grandfather died in 1986, aged 87, and when I think of him, I feel very proud. He had unshakeable morality and courage, which gave him the strength always to do the right thing. He thought it better to sacrifice your life than your integrity, and certainly some of his values have passed down through the generations.

There are certain aspects I am less comfortable with: his unyielding determination to put duty before all else made him an austere and unapproachable presence in our lives. He found it much easier to demonstrate his love for God than for his family, and our visits to him were always strained.

Yet he remains a role model for me, not least for his charitable work. (He later founded the Action Reconciliation Service for Peace, which sent young volunteers from Germany to work on projects in countries that had suffered under the Nazis.) There are memorials to him throughout Germany, which I know would embarrass him.



Jenny (left) and Martin's first meeting (with Martin's sister Ulrike, right) in 1973 | CREDIT: Courtesy of Martin Kreyssig

In some ways, the story of his life and Gertrud's has not yet ended; I feel that Jenny and I are its continuation, in different and fortunately peaceful circumstances.

Our parents were firmly convinced that our families belonged together, because of our shared history – I agree wholeheartedly, and hope that our families will continue to honour and tell the story of salvation for generations to come.

I have repeated our grandparents' story often to my children, and I know they carry it in their hearts and minds.

I was always grateful, even as a boy, not to have to tell the Nazi story. Instead, I could tell the story of the resistance and salvation. And of the rescue of Gertrud Prochownik, my good friend Jenny's grandmother.

As told to Xenia Taliotis

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