

Daughter of a Holocaust hero

Agnes Hirschi, whose father rescued thousands of Jews in Hungary, visits Israel

By Les Glassman and Larry Pfeffer

WHEN WE think of the Holocaust and the kind, resourceful and brave people who risked and sacrificed so much in order to save Jews, which names come to mind? People such as Raoul Wallenberg, Oscar Schindler and Chiune Sugihara.

To most people, Carl Lutz, the Swiss diplomat in Budapest, who was “recognized” long ago by Yad Vashem and other organizations and who even appears on an Israeli stamp, is hardly known.

This is surprising considering all the Holocaust events, programs, education, books, movies and even tours to death camps in Poland.

After all, Lutz (1895-1975) risked his career and life to protect tens of thousands of Jews from the Nazi and Hungarian *Nyilas* (Arrow Cross) murderers. According to Yad Vashem, Lutz – the Swiss Vice Consul to Hungary – was responsible for saving some 62,000 Jews from Nazi death camps over a three-year period, from 1942 to 1945.

Due to his courageous actions, almost half of the Jewish population of Budapest survived and were not deported to Nazi camps. When Raoul Wallenberg arrived, Lutz shared his experience issuing protective papers and saving Jews.

He placed many houses in Budapest under Swiss protection, including the legendary “Glass House,” where about 3,000 Jews found shelter, and which became the Zionist youth rescue underground headquarters. It is located at 29 Vadasz Street, near the Danube River and the Parliament.

We were privileged to have met in Tel Aviv recently with the daughter of Carl Lutz, Agnes Hirschi, who was visiting from her home in Switzerland to attend an important event at the University of Haifa about Jewish refugees in Switzerland. Whereas the Swiss government’s actions toward Jewish refugees were deplorable, there were some Jews who found a safe haven in Switzerland. Hirschi tirelessly labors to keep Lutz’s legacy alive.

An important Jewish principle is “recog-



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Larry Pfeffer, Agnes Hirschi and Les Glassman

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nition of kindness” (*haker at hatov*). At Holocaust events, it is obligatory to say, “One person can make a difference,” and to quote from the Talmud: “He who saved one has saved a whole world.”

In the case of the rare few like Lutz, “He who saved tens of thousands saved tens of thousands of worlds.”

We must never forget the horrible atrocities of the Holocaust and it is incumbent upon us also to remember the names and very important deeds of people such as Lutz, Wallenberg and Sugihara as well as Aristides de Sousa Mendes, George Mantello, Papal Nuncio Angelo Rotta, Giorgio Perlasca and some 80 additional diplomats who saved many Jews.

We must also remember the “Jewish Wallenbergs” – El Salvador’s First Secretary in Switzerland George Mantello (Mandel), who stopped the trains from Hungary to Auschwitz, Hillel Kook (aka Peter Bergson) in America, Gisi Fleischmann and Rabbi Michael Ber Weissmandl in Bratislava, Recha and Yitzchak Sternbuch in Switzerland, Rabbi Solomon Schonfeld in England and Wilfrid Israel in Germany, England and



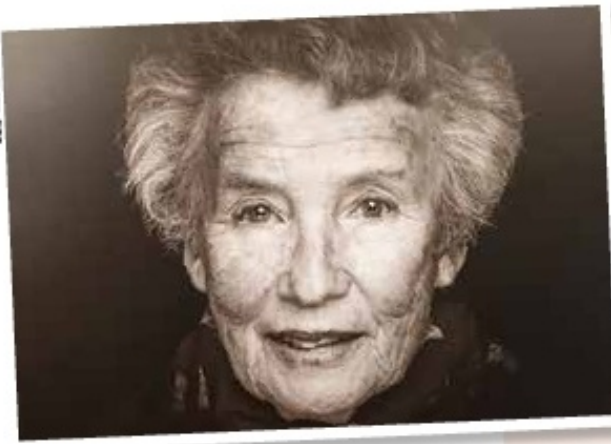
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Carl Lutz

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Portugal – people whose activism led to the rescue of hundreds of thousands.

The names of Lutz and those above should be known to all Jews and others who care about decency, bravery and heroism. They were beacons in the dark and are authentic role models whom we should all try to emulate.

Yad Vashem has a slogan: “Remembering



Agnes Hirschi at the University of Haifa in March

the Past, Shaping the Future.” Its corollary is equally significant: “Misremembering the Past, Misshaping the Future.”

There is a very small sign without a photograph about Carl Lutz at the Yad Vashem museum with the following text: “One collective passport (*Schutzpass*) issued by the Swiss consulate in Budapest, headed by Karl Lutz, for Jews who were candidates for immigration to the Land of Israel. In the passport, the consulate certifies that these Jews are under Swiss protection until their departure for the Land. In order to provide protection to as many Jews as possible, Lutz gave these approvals to families instead of individuals, and thus the collective passports covered 50,000 Jews.”

To the right of the sign, there are a Swiss protection paper and a large notice about the Relief and Rescue Committee and the controversial Dr. Rudolf Kasztner, with his picture.

At the bottom is a small photograph of the Glass House with the following text: “Jewish people in Budapest, swarming to the Glass House, in the hope of obtaining protective passes, known as *Schutzpasses*. Underground operatives working in the building distribute papers and provided refuge for thousands of Jewish people. 1944.”

A personal note by Larry Pfeffer: I was a very small child in Budapest in 1944-5. My father, Armin Pfeffer, found refuge for a while in the now legendary Glass House. I am very grateful to my mother and also to the Christian family who hid me for a while at great risk in the Buda part of Budapest, to Carl Lutz on a personal level, as well as to Raoul Wallenberg and more than 20 diplomats, who saved so many of us in Hungary. ■

My quest to maintain Lutz's legacy

I am a Holocaust survivor and owe my life to Swiss Vice Consul Carl Lutz as do tens of thousands of Hungarian Jews. Lutz provided in Budapest Swiss safe conduct papers for Jews in cooperation with Moshe Krausz of the Palestine Office and established safe houses under Swiss protection. He did it on his own initiative and risked his life and career to do so!

My parents were Hungarian Jews and I was born in London, in a country at war with Nazi Germany.

My mother and I went to see Carl Lutz in his Budapest office at the Swiss Legation to get a protection paper for me, then a six-year-old little girl and a British subject. Lutz was in charge of the Department of Foreign Interests. He found my mother sympathetic and decided

to employ her as a housekeeper in his residence, in the former British Legation in Buda. We moved there in summer 1944 and stayed with him and his wife to the end of the war.

The siege in Buda was terrible and lasted three months. From November 1944 bombing was practically non-stop. In the middle of the night I would be awakened, would take my doll and go down to the bomb shelter with my mother. There were 30 of us there in very basic conditions. After Christmas 1944 until the end of the war in Buda, mid-February 1945, we had to stay permanently in the cold bomb shelter. Food was scarce. After the Germans were driven out, diplomats were forced by the Russians to leave Hungary. In 1949, Carl Lutz married my mother in Budapest, took us to Berne, Switzerland, and that is how he became my stepfather.

Carl Lutz was the first Swiss to be recognized by Yad Vashem, in 1964. The Swiss government blamed him for overstepping his authority. They ignored him and until recently he received no recognition for his kind and heroic deeds in Hungary.

As a young girl I did not dwell much on my past and rarely spoke about it. I was too busy with all the new exciting things in my life. I travelled a lot, got married, had children and full-time employment as a journalist with a daily newspaper. There was no time to think about my past and Swiss people were not interested in the Holocaust.

This attitude changed in the 1990s when the question of the dormant assets of Jews in Swiss banks during World War II was discussed. That led to increased interest in the deeds of Carl Lutz. He was featured in Eric Saul's well known exhibit “Visas for Life” about diplomats who rescued Jews. The exhibit toured America, Israel and Europe and, partly as a result, Carl Lutz became better known. I was satisfied, as I had promised him on his death bed that I would do my best so the next generation would know about the terrible persecution and wanton murder of innocent people and his rescue activities.

My occupation with the Holocaust became and still is an important part of my life – giving speeches, organizing exhibitions, presenting a recent Lutz documentary and speaking to young people in schools in Switzerland and internationally.

Two years ago, I had the chance to publish a book together with Holocaust Prof. Charlotte Schallié from the University of Victoria, Canada. The book, *Jewish Eyewitness Accounts from Wartime Budapest*, contains 36 interviews with Holocaust survivors under Swiss protection.

It is very important to have these testimonies, as the number of the people who are able to tell their stories is diminishing. I recently presented the book at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC, at the Los Angeles Wiesenthal Center and, in March, at Haifa University in connection with the exhibition of the Gamaraal Foundation, “The Last Swiss Holocaust Survivors.”

Agnes Hirschi, Switzerland