There are many stories, perhaps millions, of Holocaust survivor descendants who are alive today only because the tenuous threads between life and death were not broken: The chance encounters, the last-minute escapes, the miraculous endurance, the courageous decisions to leap into the unknown. And then there are those that stepped forward to help fleeing refugees and the children sent out of harm’s way who left grieving parents and family members behind they would never see again.

The legacy of Olga Bergmann Gabanyi Grilli and her family is such a story. A story of tenuous threads, chance encounters and heart-breaking, courageous decisions.

Olga died last year at the age of 90, but her family, including her son and daughter-in-law Richard and Susan Grilli of Lutherville, are working to honor Olga’s memory, the Jews of the Czechoslovakian town where she was born and the English couple who took her in after Olga made the 1,000-mile trip on the last successful Czech Kindertransport out of Prague in 1939.

Throughout her life, Olga kept her story and the story of her lost family alive. Growing up in Poughkeepsie, New York, her children Richard Grilli and his sisters Ann and Barbara heard the stories. “Obsessed” with the Holocaust, Richard said his mother amassed a veritable library of books that now reside at the Grilli home.

“She read every Holocaust book; my mom was a big reader,” Richard said. “She would talk about it all the time. But every year she got older, she would talk about it more and more.”

Olga was born about 80 miles southeast of Prague, Czechoslovakia, in the village of Chotebor, June 6, 1928, just 10 years after the country’s formation and five years before the Nazi party would seize power in Germany. Her mother, Marie Bergmann was Czech, her father Imre Gabanyi was Hungarian. The marriage was arranged. A year after Olga was born her father divorced her mother — an unusual circumstance for the time — and moved back to Hungary. Marie raised her daughter alone, bringing in money by tutoring students in the German language, while the two lived with Marie’s father, Wilhelm Bergmann.

By Olga’s accounts that Richard remembers, she had a happy childhood, was a good student and learned piano. But just after Olga’s 10th birthday, in late September 1938, Hitler strong-armed European leaders into agreeing to the Munich Pact, which allowed Germany to annex parts of Czechoslovakia that had German populations in the northern, southern and western sections of the country. The agreement was to help keep peace in Europe, but it only served to embolden and increase Nazi power, leading to annexations of Czechoslovakia by Hungary and Poland.

Two months after the agreement, violence against Jews spiked during Germany’s Kristallnacht in November 1938 and Jewish refugee camps began filling up in Czechoslovakia. A month later, a young British stockbroker visited Czechoslovakia and toured some of the camps at the behest of his friend, who was associated with the British Committee for Refugees from Czechoslovakia.
Sensing the danger to Czech children as the country began breaking apart, the British stockbroker Nicholas Winton began to organize refugee relief efforts from Prague for children, like the Kindertransports rescuing Jewish children from Germany and Austria. “The first transport of children organized by Winton left Prague by plane for London on March 14, 1939, the day before the Germans occupied the Czech lands,” according to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. “After the Germans established a Protectorate in the Czech provinces of Bohemia and Moravia, Winton organized seven further transports that departed by rail out of Prague and across Germany to the Atlantic Coast, then by ship across the English Channel to Britain. At the train station in London, British foster parents waited to collect the children. The last trainload of children left Prague on August 2, 1939. Rescue activities ceased when Germany invaded Poland and Britain declared war in Germany in early September 1939.”

Somehow, as the window was closing, Olga’s aunt, who lived in Prague, heard about Winton’s Czech Kindertransport, and with aid from a Quaker organization to get the 50-pound bond required by the British government per child, Olga’s mother and aunt secured her a train ticket, as well as a host family to take her in when she arrived in England. Winton had advertised in England for families needed to take in the Czech children. Many who answered the call to help were not Jewish.

THE ODYSSEY
On a sunny, spring afternoon, Richard and Susan spread photos out on their kitchen table. One is a black-and-white snapshot of a smiling Olga dressed in traditional Czech costume, with puffy, white lacy sleeves, and embroidered bib and skirt, with a flowered headdress.

This, Richard said, is the photo that was sent to a childless elderly couple living in Croston, England, who agreed to take in the non-English speaking young girl from Chotebor. As the story goes, Norman and Merci Cardwell had the choice of two girls — and chose Olga. Just one of the tenuous threads that led to the young girl’s escape from impending Nazi occupation and from the fate that befell her family.

In late July of 1939, the decision made, Marie readied to take her daughter to the train station in Prague, and, as Richard tells it, overruled Olga’s pleas to wait until September so she could travel on the transport with her cousin, insisting she keep her spot.

There is another photo, taken in Prague of mother, aunt and Olga seated at what looks like an outdoor café table. It could be any photo of any family enjoying lunch al fresco on a warm, summer afternoon in the city. Although Olga, turned in her chair looking at the camera, seems unhappy, even distressed. Her mother and aunt observed her with care and concern. Did they sense — did they know in their bones — that this would be their last day together?

The next day, at Wilson Railway Station, 11-year-old Olga said goodbye to her mother and aunt, as hundreds of heart-wrenching goodbyes were said around them, and joined the scores of children leaving on what would be the last successful Kindertransport out of Prague. The train set for September 1, on which her cousin was to depart, never left Prague as the war in Europe began. Olga would never see her mother and aunt again, who, with another sister, were later sent to Theresienstadt transit camp (also known as Terezin) and from there to Auschwitz/Birkenau, where Richard said they were gassed on arrival.

According to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, more than 350,000 people identified themselves as Jewish in the 1930 Czech Republic census, but during the Holocaust, Nazi Germany and its collaborator governments murdered about “263,000 Jews who had resided in the territory of the Czech Republic in 1938.” During the war, thousands more were deported, or taken to Theresienstadt, before being sent to Auschwitz. By the war’s end in 1945, only “14,000 Protectorate Jews remained alive in the Czech lands.”

According to the Grillis, there are no Jews now in Chotebor, a town once peopled with Jewish families, as witnessed by its Jewish graveyard.

“She was able to lead a very productive life but there was a sadness to my mom. That’s what her friends always told me, but I don’t know if I saw it,” Richard said. “Rationally, my mom could understand why her mother...
put her on the train. But irrationally, she could never forgive her mother for letting her go. And for my mother, to not have had a father and then to lose her mother at age 11 — now that had a huge impact on her. I think she hid it well, but there was insecurity her whole life. I think it affects the children."

For the young Olga, the train trip to England was a mix of fear, anticipation and excitement.

"IT WAS AN AUSTERE LIFE. THEY DIDN'T HAVE RUNNING WATER IN THE HOUSE."

— Richard Grilli

"I think my mom thought it was a little bit of an adventure, too. Because she was given a roasted chicken to eat on the train by her mom. They traveled through Germany and then they got to Holland, and the Dutch, where they are giving them cocoa and white bread," Richard said. "Then they traveled to the Hook of Holland [a coastal town] and got on a ship to cross the channel and then took a train to Liverpool Street Station."

On arrival there, Olga waited for hours, initially deciding that the Cardwells weren't coming and had rejected her. But Norman Cardwell was only late, finally arriving to take Olga to their modest home in the village of Croston, Lancashire, about 25 miles northeast of Liverpool.

Richard remembers his mother saying it was a difficult transition for his mother, who spoke no English and found herself in a strict, Methodist household. Nevertheless, the Cardwells were loving, if not demonstrative, and took good care of the girl, who picked up English quickly and grew to love the Methodist hymns she sang in church, where she went three times on Sundays.

“She didn’t talk too much about the train. She didn’t talk about her life in England with the Cardwells,” Richard said of Olga’s two years in Croston. “It was an austere life. She cut the toilet paper, newspapers, for the outhouse. They didn’t have running water in the house. And of course, in England they’re on rationing and all kinds of things.”

“The Cardwells were religious people. And as my mom said, they practiced what they preached. There was no false pretenses with them,” Richard added. “This is what they believed in: ‘We need to save a child’s life.’"

After two years, Olga went on to The Czech School, set up in a hotel by the exiled Czech government for Czech refugee children in Llanwrtyd Wells, a small town in Wales. There, Olga made many friends.

“They still learned as if they were in the old country, taught by Czech teachers in the Czech language. And those were some of the best years of my mother’s life,” Richard said, pointing out his mother in photos taken in the 1940s at the school. “It was a wonderful time for her. She really enjoyed it and made lifetime friends. For the rest of her life she kept in touch with some of these kids.”

In 1945, Olga attended St. Godric’s Secretarial College in Hampstead, near London, where she learned secretarial skills. Two years later, in 1947, fulfilling a promise her aunt (who had escaped Czechoslovakia) had made to Olga’s mother, the aunt urged Olga to come to the U.S., where she was living in New York.

Soon after immigrating, Olga met Leon Grilli, himself a refugee from Vienna, whose family also survived only by similar tenuous threads — moving across Europe as the Nazi occupation spread and narrowly escaping by bribing the captain of a freighter after the passenger ship they were set to leave on was delayed. The passenger ship never left France. The family escaped on the freighter the day France capitulated to the Nazis. After arriving in the U.S. safely, with Richard’s father and his family, the ship was later sunk by German U-boats.

Olga and Leon were married in 1950 and settled in Poughkeepsie, New York, about 85 miles north of Manhattan, where they were active in the Jewish community. They had three children: Richard, Ann and Barbara; and, today, their legacy includes six grandchildren and five great-grandchildren.

There are close to 6,000 descendants of the 669 children that Winton saved through the Czech Kindertransport, many of whom have picked up the mantle of the well-known Talmud adage that “Whosoever rescues a single soul is credited as though they had saved the whole world.”
Olga lived a long, full life, during which she started her own wholesale book company. She kept in touch with the Cardwells until they died, and visited Croston in the 1980s, spending time with a woman who had befriended her as a girl. And later, Olga met Nicholas Winton at one of the many reunions of the Kindertransport. She remained involved and engaged with the Jewish community all of her life.

In 1993, she returned to her home town of Chotebor with her children.

"The home is gone, there's a small, little community college there," Richard said. "My sense in all of Czechoslovakia is there's no Jewish life left. Effectively, it's gone. " The family spent time in Prague and visited Terezin and Auschwitz.

Olga instilled in her children and their families the need to remember, to honor the people that had helped her survive. Before she died last year, she asked her family to honor the Cardwells, who had answered the call in 1939 and gave Olga a safe home.

The Grillis made a large donation to the church, now a school, as well as to the local Quaker organization, that at the time made Olga's trip possible by fronting the 50-pound bond.

Through a missionary contact they have in Czechoslovakia, the Grillis are renovating the Jewish cemetery in Chotebor, which had become overgrown and run-down due to age, neglect and vandalism.

For Richard and Susan it's important to remember and honor, not just Nicholas Winton, but also the families who took in the refugee children from Czechoslovakia and Austria and Germany and all of those fleeing the terror of the Holocaust.

"[Richard] wanted to go honor them," Susan said, "because, number one, he hasn't seen it done a lot. And if you don't tell the story, people aren't going to know."

"Yes," Richard said. "Everybody knows the story of Nicholas Winton. But behind Nicholas Winton were the families."

Without host families to take in the children, Nicholas Winton wouldn't have gotten them out of the country, Susan added, "But that was just half the story. There had to be host families to take the kids in."

"It was very noble of [the Cardwells] to take [Olga] in. And they wanted a Jewish family. They had it in their moral compass that this was the right thing to do," Susan said. "And they may not have been the most warm and fuzzy people, but they did what was important."

"People are always called upon to do things," she added. "You can look at Baltimore, you hear stories all the time of so many foster children and not enough host families. So this is to emphasize what went into it, what was sacrificed, what was given up, what was put aside, to take in a child."

Olga died last July 4th and was buried at Temple Beth El Cemetery in Poughkeepsie. Here in Baltimore, the Grillis have been members of Beth El Congregation in Pikesville for more than 30 years. Last month, Olga was honored as part of a Yom Hashoah event at the synagogue.

Beth El's spiritual leader, Rabbi Steven Schwartz, has known the Grillis for more than 20 years. He describes Susan and Richard as "shul-goers," devoted congregants who attend Shabbat regularly, often on Friday nights and Saturday mornings — a devotion they have passed onto their children, who Schwartz said are very Jewishly engaged.

He sees the Grillis' keeping the flame of Olga's story alive as having a wider, more far-reaching impact.

"I think Richard feels a responsibility for keeping the story alive and reminding people of what happened to his family," Schwartz said. "And by doing that, reminding people what happened to the Jewish family."

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Susan and Richard Grilli. seventh from left, at the plaque dedication in March at Trinity Methodist Church in Croston, England, to honor Norman and Merci Cardwell who saved Olga’s life.

Olga Bergmann Gabanyi Grilli

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