

*“What always gets me is when I think, how could I give my kids away?
How brave our parents were and how unselfish.”* – Lea

*“I feel that I survived because of the goodness of people in spite of
the inhumanities, and so I’m only willing to focus on the goodness. . . . I feel
for myself that I have forgiven, although I will never forget.”* – Ruth



Lea Weems & Ruth Steinfeld

EVERY SABBATH ALFRED KRELL, CLAD IN LONG COAT and black hat, proudly strolled to synagogue with his daughters, Lea and Ruth, on his arms. The sisters describe the early years of their childhood in Sinsheim, Germany as “wonderful.” Alfred, who owned a gourmet import business and served as the synagogue’s caretaker, provided them with a comfortable home, and his wife Anna created a warm and loving atmosphere. Lea was born in 1932 and Ruth followed a year later, about the same time Hitler came to power. Their early years, though comfortable and secure, were colored by growing antisemitic persecution.

In 1940, the Krells were deported to the internment camp of Gurs in the French Pyrenees. Alfred was separated from Anna and his daughters, who spent the next several months languishing in the drafty barracks of the immense camp. They slept on straw and subsisted on watery soup, “but it was still okay,” recalls Lea, “because our mother was still with us and it wasn’t like we were by ourselves.” Then the unspeakable happened: Alfred and Anna (who had found a way to communicate with each other in the camp) made the wrenching decision to entrust their girls to a Jewish philanthropic organization called the *Oeuvres de Secours aux Enfants* (OSE), which promised to shelter them. Lea and Ruth were never to see their parents again. They lived first in a group home and later with a kind foster family in a small farming community. Posing as Catholics, Lea and Ruth were safe only until the villagers began to suspect their true identities. Then the OSE moved them to another orphanage, where they remained until war’s end.

In 1946, the girls’ grandfather, Jakob Kapustin, brought them to the United States. He died only six months later. Ruth and Lea moved in with an aunt and uncle who treated them unkindly. When a Jewish relief organization offered the sisters the opportunity to move to another city and complete their schooling, they took it. Both recall that they chose Houston because they knew there were cowboys in Texas. Lea married and had four children. Divorced in 1978, she married Charles Weems, her “wonderful cowboy Texan” four years later. Ruth married Larry Steinfeld, raised three daughters, and opened a hair salon that quickly became successful. The sisters are involved in Jewish causes, Lea serving as the president of the Houston Council of Jewish Holocaust Survivors and on the board of the OSE. Ruth is active with B’nai Brith and Hadassah. Both serve on the board of Holocaust Museum Houston. Ruth and Lea were among the first survivors to talk publicly about their experiences, and they are much in demand as speakers.



Above: Ruth (left) and Lea with their mother, Anna, Ladenburg, Germany, 1936. Opposite: Lea (left) and Ruth (right).

Ruth Steinfeld

Born: Ruth Krell
Mannheim, Germany
July 8, 1933

Lea Weems

Born: Lea Krell
Mannheim, Germany
May 23, 1932

Parents:

Alfred Krell, *d. Auschwitz, 1942*
Anna Kapustin Krell, *d. Auschwitz, 1942*