

OBITUARIES

|| PAUL KRAUS | 1919-2014

World War II hero, distilling COO

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It was the scar on his cheek that gave away Otto Skorzeny, the Nazi credited with leading a daring raid that whisked dictator Benito Mussolini from mountaintop captivity in Italy during World War II.

That, and the keen observational skills of Paul Kraus, an Austrian-born American GI whose Jewish parents and brother perished at Auschwitz. Mr. Kraus sensed the demanding German SS officer in front of him was more than he seemed.

When Mr. Kraus saw the man's *renommierschmiss* — a “bragging scar” caused by the slashes of dueling — he knew he had nabbed a Hitler favorite dubbed “the most dangerous man in Europe.”

After the war, Mr. Kraus wound up in Chicago, where he worked for the distiller Barton Brands. He died Sept. 22 at his Gold Coast home. He was 95.

He discussed his capture of Skorzeny in a 1952 interview with the Omaha World Herald after a former superior officer alerted the Nebraska newspaper to the story.

Days after Germany surrendered in 1945, Mr. Kraus was assigned to an intelligence unit near Salzburg, Austria, where thousands of POWs milled around. “I was just sitting there, when in walked a big German officer,” he told the World Herald. “He demanded a pass to get into a sector to round up more of his men. I immediately recognized him by the dueling scars on his face and from his pictures.”

“I would have recognized him in the dead of night,” he said in a 1965 interview with Kentucky's Louisville-Courier Journal.

Mr. Kraus, called from a mess hall to speak to the officer who wanted a pass “right now,” was armed with a knife and fork. Skorzeny had a sidearm, like other German military leaders charged with assembling their soldiers.

The fast-thinking American told Skorzeny to accompany him to an office to get his pass — and to re-



Paul Kraus was an Austrian-born American GI who nabbed high-ranking German officer Otto Skorzeny, who helped lead a commando mission that freed Benito Mussolini from a mountaintop jail. | SUBMITTED PHOTO

trieve his own gun, according to the World Herald. “I took him into a room and pulled my .45, got his gun and told him who he was,” Mr. Kraus said.

“He did not deny it. In fact, he was very congenial,” he said.

Fluent in German, Czech and French, Mr. Kraus questioned Skorzeny, who was among a group later tried but acquitted on charges they used American uniforms to infiltrate Allied lines at the Battle of the Bulge, spreading disinformation and chaos.

He asked his prisoner about a rumor that Hitler had assigned Skorzeny to assassinate General Dwight D. Eisenhower, the supreme commander of the Allied Forces in Europe. Skorzeny “was most emphatic that this was pure fabrication,” Kraus told the Courier-Journal. “But he did talk freely with me throughout that afternoon about some of his experiences. He was congenial and easy to talk to except when we put handcuffs on him.

“He protested he was an officer and shouldn’t be treated like a common criminal.”

During the war, Mr. Kraus also met Audie Murphy, the legendary marksman credited with more than 200 “kills.” Mr. Kraus’ son, Allen, recalled his father’s description of Murphy as “this crazy kid. He’d come and say, ‘Get up, Kraus, we’re going to get some Krauts.’”

The 130-pound Murphy, who honed his sharpshooting by killing squirrels and rabbits in his home state of Texas so his family could eat, mowed down 50 German soldiers in one afternoon, when he commandeered a tank destroyer machine gun and held off 250 enemy fighters. The feat earned him the Medal of Honor and a reputation for laconic understatement. When an officer on a battlefield phone asked him how close the enemy was, Murphy reportedly said, “Hold the phone, I’ll let you talk to one.”

Mr. Kraus grew up in Austria and attended medical school at

Charles University in Prague. As Europe crumbled to the Nazis, he fled to Shanghai, where many Jewish people sought refuge.

He appealed to his parents, Emil and Marie, to go with him, along with his teenage brother, Fredrick. They didn’t want to leave. His father, a chemical engineer, had a distillery and a farm. Later, Mr. Kraus found records showing they were killed at Auschwitz. “He lived with regret the rest of his life. He thought about it every day,” his son said.

His older brother and sister, Frank and Anny, had already made their way to America. He followed. For nearly half a century, he worked for Barton Brands in Kentucky, Nebraska and Chicago, rising to the post of chief operating officer. He purchased the corn, barrels and glass used in distilling its bourbons, and traveled to Scotland and Mexico for key Barton imports, including Scotch, tequila, mezcal and Corona beer.

An elegant skier, he didn’t stop

schussing down slopes till he was 92, said his companion of 28 years, Sheila Burkhardt. His favorite spot was St. Anton in Austria, where the other skiers called him ‘Whiskey Paul’ for his distilling work. He also enjoyed skiing in Snowmass, Colorado.

His family has postwar photos he took at Kehlsteinhaus, or Eagle’s Nest. Mr. Kraus was among the victorious Allied soldiers who visited Hitler’s mountaintop retreat. He swiped a swastika-decorated souvenir, said his daughter, Virginia. “Daddy took a spoon from the silver service. They took a bunch of wine,” she said.

But their Jeep was commandeered by superior officers, and the wine disappeared.

He read 20th century history constantly, especially about Hitler and the Nazis, his family said. “He really did care a lot about justice and human rights,” said Joanie Schirm, who wrote the nonfiction book, “Adventurers Against Their Will,” based on the letters of her Czech Jewish father, Oswald Holzer, and his many friends scattered by the war, including Mr. Kraus.

“Dad told me when I was quite young that while he might not be there for us when we were little, he’d do better relating to us when we were adults,” said his other daughter, Carole. “In the end, he became a loving father and trusted friend.”

Mr. Kraus liked to dine at Kiki’s Bistro. He and Burkhardt often attended the Lyric Opera and Chicago Symphony Orchestra, where they enjoyed the music of Schubert and Mozart.

He is also survived by four grandchildren. A luncheon to commemorate his life is planned in November in Chicago. Mr. Kraus was cremated.

Though he skied each year in his homeland, he didn’t want his ashes scattered over the mountains of St. Anton, Burkhardt said. “He said, ‘Don’t bring a part of me back to Austria. They didn’t want me.’”

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