

HOW MRS. STEINKRAUS-COHEN GOT HER TOWN

TO THINK  
globally

THE  
STORY OF

ruth

The year was 1945, and the world could finally exhale. The Third Reich was defeated and U.S. troops were coming home.

And, in arguably one of the most historic events of the Second World War, fifty-one countries joined together to form the United Nations, a multilateral peacekeeping union, to ensure that tragedies such as the Holocaust never happen again. Its mission was to be vigilant against tyranny in all forms and to open the world's eyes to the possibility of world peace.

BY BETH BRESNAHAN

CHICHI UBINA



In her twenties Ruth Steinkraus was an accomplished pianist who gave recitals in New York.

That same year, twenty-five-year-old Ruth Steinkraus was opening her eyes to the world from her home in Westport. A recent graduate of Vassar, where ideas about world issues were sown, this former music major was slowly developing a passion for activism. Perhaps it was the fact that while in college she had met a female prime mover of her day, Eleanor Roosevelt,

when the then first lady attended one of Ruth's recitals. Or maybe it was about the struggles in Europe. Either way, thoughts about changing the world for the better stirred deep within her, and that fervor would grow. Decades later, this passion would earn our local resident praise from U.S. presidents, world leaders and a lifetime of friends.

In Westport, she is best known for originating and running UN Day each June, an event that has taken on the logo of jUNE Day, a bane of copyeditors that nonetheless places the UN at center stage. The annual event, held for the past forty years, celebrates the signing of the UN charter. And it brings more than five hundred diplomats and their families to Westport, which comes alive with a rainbow of colors as flags of the world line the bridge on the Post Road.

It's not just this day, however, that consumes Ruth, but a year of activity that includes bringing international journalists to town, organizing tributes to women, publishing a UN calendar and hosting dinners for dignitaries, not to mention making regular trips from Westport to the United Nations headquarters in Manhattan.

All of this fervor, she says, was forged by the deep impression left by World War II and the horrors it wrought. "I remember it like it was yesterday," says Mrs. Steinkraus-Cohen, who turned eighty this year. "When Hitler moved into Poland, the shock! I was in college at Vassar. We were very political there. We wanted to make a change."

It would take a decade and a half, but at thirty-six, Ruth finally got her opportunity to make that change.

In 1956 the World Federation of the UN Association (UNA) meeting was held in Warsaw, and Eleanor Roosevelt, who had become active in the UN Association, asked Ruth to join her at the conference as her secretary.

"It was a fascinating experience," Mrs. Steinkraus-Cohen says. "It was my first international conference. It could have been Paris; it could have been London. It was very refined, elegant style — beautiful conference hall, beautiful meals, courteous people, excellent translations, serious discussions.

"One day Mrs. Roosevelt wanted to go to

Kraków. Well, that was a most revealing experience. The people were so poor. We rode an empty bus that had no seats. We went out of Warsaw on the only road, and you wondered how could Poland have such distinct personality when they were so indefensible. And there is history; of course, it was indefensible. And so that was revelatory to me."

Also revelatory was the dichotomous experience of riding a hollowed-out bus and seeing postwar poverty, yet still traveling with Eleanor Roosevelt and having the opportunity to visit Chopin's birthplace, play his piano and mingle with diplomats. The stark contrast of the situation stirred something inside of Ruth.

But one more dose of reality would cause her compassion to transform into action.

"When I got back from Kraków, our interpreter said he and his wife wanted to take me to the old city. He was a Polish man married to an American girl. We arranged to meet, but only she came later and told me it was off. She said, 'We can't go tonight — my husband's just been arrested.' He had bought a copy of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, for which he was arrested." Khrushchev had Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's book sanctioned in 1963. "The tears fell from our eyes."

And in what she calls "a flash of inspiration", Ruth says she thought of Westport and the fact that it is only fifty miles from the United Nations. Perhaps the diplomats would be interested in meeting ordinary people there, away from their secluded and refined meeting areas. Perhaps it would be a learning experience for them — and help them stay in touch with the freedoms for which they were fighting.

So Ruth went to work.

Later that year, with the help of the local UNA (which she helped found), she organized a ball for UN ambassadors at Longshore, which had just become the property of the Town of Westport. It was a small affair, followed by a "hoedown" for the same group in 1957. They held similar events for foreign students at the University of Bridgeport and the UN delegates over the next two years.

But when eighteen new countries — mostly French-speaking African nations — signed onto the United Nations in 1960, the stakes were much higher. Civil rights tensions were at

a fever pitch. In the South, visiting dignitaries Ruth describes as "the George Washingtons of their countries" couldn't eat at American restaurants or use public rest rooms. That's when she first approached the local UNA about the jUNE Day concept of home hospitality.

She combed the streets of Manhattan for French-speaking volunteers who had been to Africa, recruiting everyone from her French teacher to hairdressers, to help with the sixty guests who would come to Westport from the eighteen African nations.

Like the four previous years the event was a success — until the Ku Klux Klan surfaced. Threatening letters were left under the hotel doors of these dignitaries. Nigerian spokesmen cried racism and demanded that his continent's nations pull out of the UN.

But at the UN an ambassador from Chad, citing the hospitality he had experienced in Westport, argued that America was not all racist. The media grabbed hold of this event, and after much debate, these African countries decided to remain with the UN.

"The power of this event made us realize that you can't just do one event," says Ruth. "You have to keep up the friendship." ▶

In 1958 Ruth Steinkraus had her own radio show with an international flavor on ABC's WNAB. Here she and a guest discussed the work of Sir Thomas Beecham of the London Philharmonic Orchestra.





Ruth's parents, Westporters Herman and Marjorie Steinkraus, step out on the town.

For the past forty years, Ruth and other UNA members have worked with a committee for international civil service and have brought a UN family to Fairfield County every month. During the 1970s, she began her ongoing support of the International Hospitality Committee of Fairfield County, which welcomed more than 350 children of UN families to the area. Members of this group continue to meet every Wednesday at Ruth's home.

And then, of course, there is still jUNE Day, which Ruth and hundreds of volunteers have developed into the event it is today. Ambassadors, diplomats, their families, the UN soccer club, tennis club, golf club, and so many others come to Westport every year for a celebration of the international group's purpose.

Today, jUNE Day is a weeklong display of affection to the visiting diplomats. UN guests stay in the homes of Westport residents and are treated to picnics at Longshore, sporting events at Camp Mahackeno, barbecues, music, discussions, tributes from the town's children — and, of course, the scenic display of UN flags along the Post Road bridge over the Saugatuck. It has become a time-honored event that defines a part of Westport — so much so that the town is working to establish a fund to aid the efforts of volunteers. This couldn't be more thrilling to Ruth. Of her jUNE Day group, she says, "My committee is a very gifted body of experienced, wonderful people who share the same philosophy. I've never done anything alone. Our accomplishments were done together." In all, she says, more than fifty-three thousand guests have come to Westport.

And by no means is Ruth slowing down. Currently, she serves on the UN's National Council for International Visitors, representing it every Thursday at the United Nations.

Even the official status of this committee in UN eyes as a nongovernmental organization (NGO) came at Ruth's behest.

"A judge in San Francisco had heard about our efforts through the African incident. In the early days of Washington, NGO status was an honorary title. I told him it's not an honorary position; it's a working position. So we had this changed, and he named me fifteen years ago as the representative in New York. It was a wonderful advancement for the UN."

Today, Ruth divides her time between several major projects for the United Nations. She recently created the official UN "Calendar for Peace", which denotes the body's day-to-day accomplishments and anniversaries of its events. The calendar is published in several languages and sent around the world.

Ruth has been involved in two other major events. One is the UN Training Program for

Broadcasters and Journalists from Developing Countries. It involved twenty media representatives from Bahrain, Colombia, Cyprus, Libya, Malta, Peru and Tanzania, who stay at the homes of area residents.

The second, the even bigger event, is a tribute to Connecticut's most outstanding women in the UN peace movement. The first was held in 1976, started by then-governor Ella Grasso. One hundred women were honored for their outstanding contributions to the goals of the women's movement of the United Nations. More women were celebrated in 1987 at a Nairobi conference, and Ruth thinks another tribute is long overdue.

"Well, now it's the millennium, and we're collecting the names of one hundred outstanding women in Connecticut who have contributed but not yet received the recognition they deserve," she says. "We'll honor them and have a ceremony in the state legislature, too."

All of this may seem like a lot to handle for a woman entering her ninth decade of life. But not for Ruth. Her commitment to the United Nations remains tireless.

"I'm thinking about it constantly," she says of the UN. "It's never out of my mind. I'm doing it all the time. It's great fun and it's always there for me. I realize I have to live a lot longer to really fulfill all my goals."

Her emphasis on the future comes on the heels of a not-so-well-known bout with uterine cancer last year. After a series of serious operations, Ruth beat the odds and has not wasted a moment on returning to the passions of her cause.

"The UN is doing God's work on earth," she says. "From the atom to cruelty in zoos, there's a UN body paying attention to it."

It's almost impossible to reveal any aspect of Ruth's life without mentioning the United Nations. The fabric of the UN is woven not only into her public cause but also into her family, her marriage, her home, her passion for music and literature and her personal collections.

Ruth's father's family came from Krefeld, Germany, a group of church organists, Lutheran ministers and medical people. A special program provided the incentive for their emigration.

"Cleveland offered free housing for a year to a family in the arts if they would go to a major

city and take apprentices," Ruth explains. "So grandfather had four children and brought them all to Cleveland. He was an architect; his brothers became doctors of philosophy and theologians."

This was where Ruth's father, Herman, met her mother, Marjorie, a schoolteacher. They were together just once before Herman went off to fight in WW I, but the two stayed in touch. "She knitted clothing for him and sent copies of *Life* magazine with cigarettes hidden in between the pages," Ruth says. "He was in the army of occupation in Germany. It was very tough for his family speaking German at home."

Luckily, Herman returned to the United States — a colonel — and found Marjorie, "a beautiful, Phi Beta Kappa graduate from Boston University", and asked her to marry him. "It was the second time they ever saw each other," Ruth says. "I think I was conceived on their wedding night." Her father would go on to head up Bridgeport Brass, become president

Awards and delegates abound with Mrs. Steinkraus-Cohen each June in Westport at the annual jUNE Day celebration.





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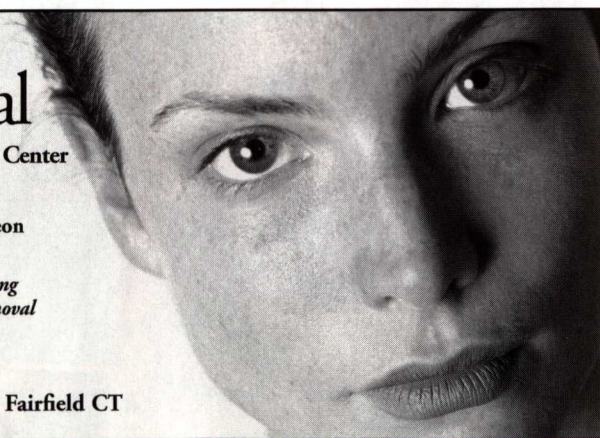
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of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and, later, the U.S. president of the World UN Association.

Mrs. Steinkraus-Cohen is the oldest of three siblings, all of whom have achieved enormous success. Her brother, Bill Steinkraus, who now lives in Darien, was a U.S. Olympic equestrian champion. At the 1968 Mexico City Olympics, he was the first American to win an individual championship in his sport. Her sister, Marjorie, two years younger than Ruth, was a television model in the 1940s who later married a French count and now resides in France. The three siblings visit each other regularly, the Concorde once the favored mode of transportation. In fact, Marjorie visited Ruth last year and had traveled a week earlier on the same Concorde that crashed in Paris.

And what about a family of her own? "I had a wonderful romance that ended in marriage in 1963," Ruth quips.

And it is a quip: She speaks of her marriage to Herbert Cohen, a noted New York attorney, with the butterflies of a woman head over heels in love for the first time.

"I was having a very good time," she says. "I really wasn't thinking about being married. I had this interesting life: I was playing piano; I was editing and collecting music; I was traveling with my brother in Germany for competitions. I would go to bookstores and operas. I had been doing this for years.

"Well, it was during our call out for people who spoke French for our African guests when he offered to help. He instantly swept me off my feet."

He, in his fifties, divorced with two children; she, forty-two, never been married. "We had twenty glorious years together," she says with a smile.

In 1977, the two adopted a son, Om Prakash Sharma, from India, through the UN programs Ruth was running. He was an accomplished artist and a

sitar player. His vivid, contemporary paintings not only line the walls of Ruth's home, but also the walls of the Museum of Modern Art in New Delhi. He studied his instrument with Ravi Shankar and played nightly with Herbert, a classically trained violinist.

"It's fascinating to make a connection or a friendship with somebody from a different culture," Ruth says. "It changes your life."

Those life changes are well documented throughout Ruth's home. It is a testament to her endless knowledge on so many subjects and a tribute to her world travels and contributions to the United Nations.

Like markers for the many foreign destinations she has seen, paintings and artifacts from all over the world fill her home. So, too, do the dozens and dozens of plaques and awards honoring her contributions. And outside, English monastery gardens and hundred-year-old trees fill her two-acre Darbrook Road estate. A special garden in the center of the property marks a memorial where her husband's ashes are buried.

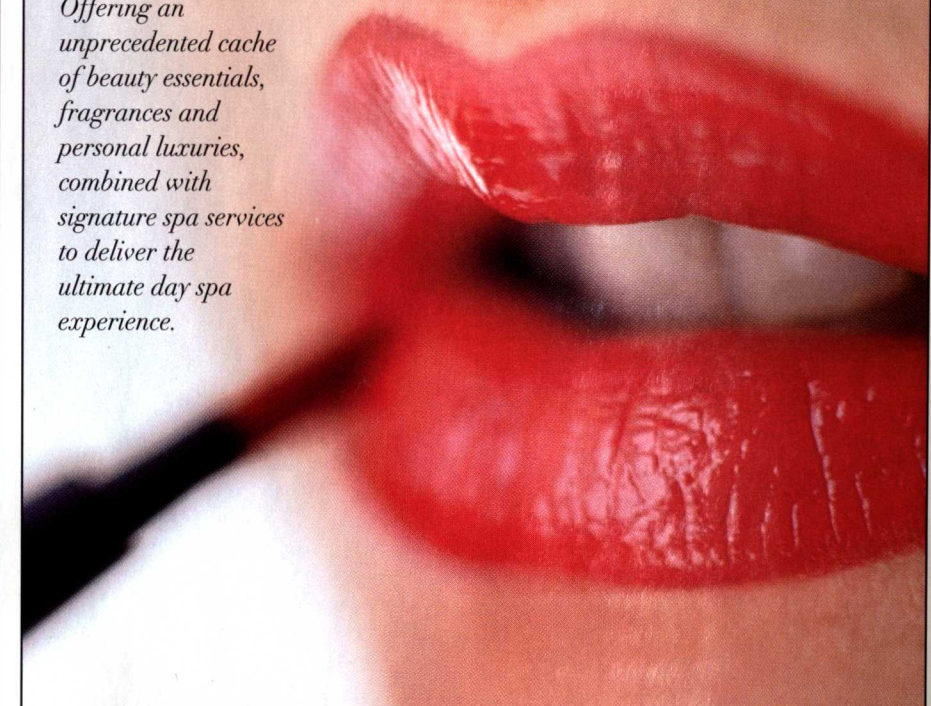
By far, the most voluminous and rare of Ruth's collections are her books. "I lived in the rare book area of London," she says. "Collecting books has been a fantastic hobby of mine."

There are thousands of volumes in her basement turned library and books upon books in every room in her home.

Ruth has an entire walk-in closet filled with the writings of her most favored philosopher, Hugo Grotius, who first penned the rights of war and peace and international law in the mid-seventeenth century. She has many of his personal journals, which contain the writer's letters to Galileo. She also owns what Yale has deemed the most impressive collection in private hands of Mozart, Beethoven and Bach first edition scores. An incredible collection. ▶

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She's a Westport institution and a legend in her own right — Ruth Steinkraus-Cohen. And over the years she has become virtually synonymous with the United Nations, achieving her goal of trying to change the world right from her hometown.

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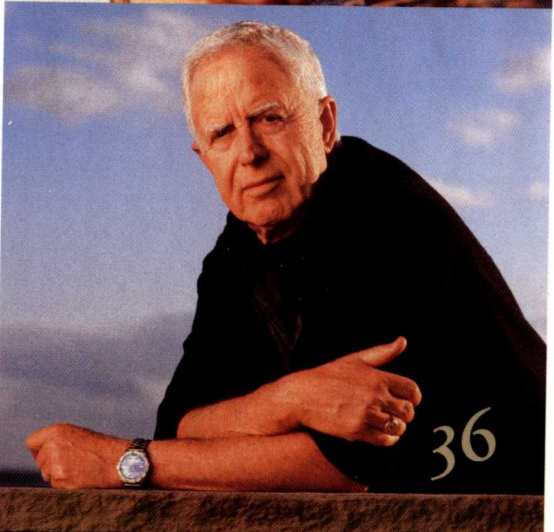
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