

How an escape from Nazi Austria led to a \$9 million gift to Georgia College

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Years before her death, Gertrude Ehrlich decided her will and testament would include a [\\$9 million gift to Georgia College & State University in Milledgeville](#). It would be Ehrlich's way of giving back to the institution that welcomed her with a refugee scholarship and helped set her on a lifelong academic path.

Ehrlich was 15 when she fled Nazi-controlled Austria with her mother, sister and aunt in 1939. Months later, living in Atlanta, she wrote to the Department of Education to ask where she should be placed in the local school system.

She was advised to enter college rather than complete high school and was admitted to Georgia State College for Women - now Georgia College & State University - on a scholarship administered by the Young Women's Christian Association.

Ehrlich died in late 2024 at the age of 102 in Gaithersburg, Maryland, according to the university, which recently received the \$9 million donation following the settlement of her estate.

She specified that the Dr. Gertrude Ehrlich Endowed Scholarship would be used to support students in need. A portion of the scholarship will be allocated to local Pell Grant-eligible students for housing.

"We are one of only three states that don't have a needs-based scholarship program," said Seth Walker, vice president for university advancement. "There's just honestly not that many additional resources that we can pull on. By having these funds, it allows us to make sure that we can provide for those who might not otherwise be able to attend the college."

Ehrlich graduated from Georgia State College for Women in 1943.

Over the course of her life, she earned a master's degree in mathematics from the University of North Carolina and a Ph.D. from the University of Tennessee. She went on to become a professor of mathematics at the University of Maryland, where she taught for 37 years, and authored several mathematics textbooks before retiring.

Ehrlich never married and had no remaining family when she died, Walker said. Exactly how she accumulated her wealth is unclear, but her textbook writing projects and smart money management were big contributors, according to Walker.

In 2017, Steve Dorman, then-president of Georgia College & State University, and Stacey Lumley, the university's director of multimedia, visited Ehrlich at her Maryland home for an extended [video interview reflecting on her life and legacy](#).

During that conversation, Ehrlich recounted a series of events that allowed her family to escape Austria ahead of the Holocaust. Years earlier, her uncle had left Austria after his mother - Ehrlich's grandmother - disapproved of the woman he intended to marry. The couple traveled to the United States, married aboard the ship and eventually settled in Atlanta.

That decision, Ehrlich said, proved pivotal. It was that same uncle who later sponsored Ehrlich, her mother, sister and aunt to come to the United States in 1939. Her father and another aunt followed in 1940. The family traveled to New York City aboard a Dutch cruise liner before making their way to Atlanta.

"If my maternal grandmother had liked her prospective daughter-in-law, we might have died," Ehrlich said in the 2017 interview.

Ehrlich was born in Vienna and remembered it as a beautiful city where her family lived happily before Adolf Hitler's rise to power. As the Nazi regime tightened its grip by annexing Austria, Jewish citizens were expelled from schools and universities.

"Horrible things happened," Ehrlich told Dorman and Lumley. "You could be arrested for just looking Jewish. You could be taken to a concentration camp."

During that time, her older sister Greta was studying to complete her Ph.D. in physics by 1940. Ehrlich herself was attending a Jewish school, which was eventually shut down. The family knew they had to leave, she said.

While in the college in Milledgeville, Ehrlich served as chair of the math club. After graduation, she briefly taught high school, worked as a research associate at Rich's department store and taught at Oglethorpe University for about four years. During summers, she completed her master's degree at the University of North Carolina.

Her parents and sister eventually moved to Maryland, which led the math scholar to relocate, too. Her sister became a physicist and earned her Ph.D. decades later, Ehrlich said.

For Ehrlich, teaching became her way of expressing herself, she said.

During Dorman and Lumley's 2017 visit, Ehrlich confirmed she had already decided to leave a large financial gift to Georgia College & State University through her will.

"They were so kind to me," Ehrlich said. "I didn't pay a penny for anything. It was an extremely generous scholarship, and it would be nice if you had such a thing now for refugees from all sorts of places."