

John Krebs, former Fresno congressman, dies at 87

By Tim
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Former Fresno congressman John Krebs in January 2014. Mr. Krebs died Nov. 10 at age 87.
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- John Hans Krebs

Born: Dec. 17, 1926, in Berlin, Germany

Died: Nov. 10, 2014, in Fresno

Age: 87

Residence: Fresno

Occupation: Retired attorney. Fresno County Planning Commission member, 1965-1969. Fresno County Board of Supervisors, 1971-1974. Member of the U.S. House of Representatives, 1975-1979.

Survivors: Wife Hanna Krebs of Fresno, son Daniel Krebs of San Anselmo, daughter Karen Krebs Wood of Connecticut, and five grandchildren.

Services: Noon Friday, Nov. 14, at Temple Beth Israel, 6622 N. Maroa Ave., Fresno.

Former Fresno congressman John H. Krebs, who served two terms in the House of Representatives in the wake of

the Watergate political scandal in the mid-1970s, died Monday afternoon in Fresno. He was 87.

Before he served in Congress from 1975 to 1979, Mr. Krebs made a name for himself as a young Democratic party activist in Fresno, and stirred the ire of prominent local developers with his votes as a member of the Fresno County Planning Commission in the late 1960s. In a recall election for the Fresno County Board of Supervisors in 1970, Mr. Krebs was the top vote-getter in a field of nine candidates, and handily won re-election in 1972.

Rep. Jim Costa, D-Fresno, who worked on Mr. Krebs' first campaign for Congress in 1974 and remained a close friend over the past 40 years, said his former boss' life story "is really an American story." Mr. Krebs was born in Berlin, Germany, in December 1926, the second son of Jewish dentist James Krebs and his wife, Elizabeth. Growing anti-Jewish sentiments in Germany with the rise of the Nazi party prompted the family to flee to Tel Aviv, in what was then British-controlled Palestine — now Israel — when Mr. Krebs was 7.

As a teenager in Palestine, Mr. Krebs quit school and became an apprentice diamond cutter. He also got involved with the Haganah, a Jewish underground movement that supported independence from Britain and establishment of an Israeli free state. Mr. Krebs recalled those times in a 1970 interview with *The Bee*: "At night we'd drive around for the Haganah, carrying a secret radio transmitter in the trunk," he said. "I never got caught, but the driver did. A tall redhead. They caught him with a truckload of ammunition. ... A lot of those Haganah kids aren't alive today."

Costa said Mr. Krebs' father worked to get his son a student visa to the U.S. because "he thought John would get in trouble" with the Haganah.

Mr. Krebs came to the U.S. as a 20-year-old student in 1946 after he was accepted at the University of California at Berkeley. He graduated in 1950, became a U.S. citizen in 1952 and was drafted six months later. He served as a corporal in the U.S. Army infantry in Europe and was discharged in 1954. "John always joked that he was sent to Germany instead of Korea because he spoke fluent German," Costa recalled.

Following his hitch in the Army, Mr. Krebs returned to school at Hastings College of Law in San Francisco. There he met Hanna Jacobsen, and the two married in 1956. He earned his law degree and was admitted to the state Bar in 1957 and moved to Fresno, where he began practicing law and quickly became involved in Democratic Party politics. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, he was a member of the Fresno County Democratic Central Committee.

In 1974, Mr. Krebs became the first foreign-born congressman from California and, Costa said, one of the first two Jewish-Americans elected to Congress west of the Mississippi River. "He was part of the 1974 class in Congress who were referred to as the Watergate babies," Costa said, referring to the bungled 1972 political burglary and subsequent coverup that eventually led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon.

"It's a tremendous credit to our system," Krebs said in a 1978 interview. "Here I can come to a community as an immigrant, really not knowing a soul, and 27 years later, I am elected to Congress."

Mr. Krebs ran unopposed for reelection in 1976, but lost in his bid for a third House term in 1978, when he was defeated by Republican Charles "Chip" Pashayan. "It was considered an upset. It surprised most people, including myself," Pashayan said Tuesday.

"John and I had a severe difference on the issues," added Pashayan, who served in the House until 1991. "But putting that aside, his was a remarkable life. He was born abroad, came to the U.S., learned about California law to pass the bar and practice law" before embarking on his political career. "He had a notable career, notable and unusual."

Pashayan recalled that Mr. Krebs' law partner in his early career in Fresno was "an old friend of my father," Harold Parichan. "If you looked at John's voting record in the abstract, you'd guess he was from a big city, squarely on the left," Pashayan added. "And Harold was way over to the right. So there's a little bit of irony, but they were successful as lawyers in the same firm."

As a member of Congress, Mr. Krebs successfully fought to preserve the Mineral King Valley in the southern Sierra Nevada, where the Walt Disney Company had ambitious plans to develop a year-round alpine resort. His legislation expanded Sequoia National Park to encompass the Mineral King area, but it was a move that riled labor unions who eyed jobs associated with the resort's construction and operation.

"Mineral King is one of those examples where he believed wilderness areas should be put aside in perpetuity," Costa said. "John went against the grain, and it certainly cost him politically."

Don Larson, a retired history and political science professor who befriended Mr. Krebs in 1958, agreed. "He basically sacrificed a congressional career to preserve Mineral King and keep it from being developed by Disney," said Larson, who coordinated Mr. Krebs' first House campaign and was with the Krebs family when he passed on Monday afternoon.

Mr. Krebs' efforts were recognized in 2009, when Congress designated the John Krebs Wilderness, encompassing about 40,000 acres in the Mineral King Valley in Sequoia National Park. "I'm sure that John felt Mineral King was at the top of his list of accomplishments," Larson said, recalling Mr. Krebs' enjoyment of the dedication ceremony for the wilderness area. "He was thrilled, and it was wonderful that all of his family was there, his wife, his children and grandchildren. It was an incredibly special day for him."

"I really feel that Mineral King was my legacy, for better or for worse," Mr. Krebs told The Bee in 2007.

After his tenure in Congress, Mr. Krebs ran unsuccessfully in 1980 for a judgeship on the Fresno County Superior Court — his last campaign for public office. He returned to his law practice in Fresno until his retirement in 1993.

Mr. Krebs typically maintained a no-nonsense, buttoned-down public persona during and even after his political career, but Larson said that belied a great sense of humor. "You could give him a bad time and he could give you one right back," Larson said. "We'd go back and forth all the time."

Larson recalled one time when he had to remain behind at an event in Laton and Mr. Krebs offered to drive his wife back home to Fresno — and unexpectedly regaled her with Hebrew songs from his childhood during the drive. "He was a lot of fun to be around," Larson said. "I feel it's been a privilege in my life to know John Krebs and to hold him as a friend."

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