




COURTESY BUENA VISTA UNIVERSITY



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Albert Hirsch



From Frankfurt to Storm Lake

by William H. Cumberland

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Olson and Hirsch had at least one thing in common: both had fought hard to save struggling institutions. Olson had steered Buena Vista College through the lean depression years. Hirsch had fought valiantly to save his Jewish school, the Philanthropin in Frankfurt, from the ravages of Nazi persecution.

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Immigrant Albert Hirsch (above) taught foreign languages at Storm Lake's Buena Vista College (left) for three decades.



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The Buena Vista campus in 1946 consisted of an aging central building known as Old Main, constructed in 1891; a gymnasium built just after World War I and christened Victory Hall; and Science Hall, completed in 1926. An additional building, made of army surplus material, housed the library volumes. The 500 students resided in off-campus housing or commuted. The small campus was situated close to billowing Storm Lake, which invited both fishing and boating. In 1946 the college benefited from a large influx of World War II veterans eager to obtain an education via the GI Bill. Accreditation by the North Central Association, which had been postponed during the depression, was now a must. For the college, a seasoned European scholar like Albert Hirsch was a real find.

Hirsch had spent most of his life in Frankfurt. He served in the German army during World War I and then became a teacher. He was popular with his students and, though short of stature, he kept his English language class in good order. (In turn, his students, who

had learned the British word for policeman, affectionately nicknamed their teacher "Bobby.") During the 1920s he authored two widely used German language texts. In May 1925 he married another Frankfurt native, Lilly Hock, the daughter of a Frankfurt bank official. Lilly was a dynamic, intelligent woman of considerable courage, who was not afraid to make her opinions known. Her educational interests were statistics and mathematics and she was an experienced bookbinder. The couple had two children, Rudolph and Hanna. The Hirsches, like the majority of German Jews, were assimilated into German culture and national life. They thought of themselves as Germans and had not the slightest thought of emigrating to another country.

Indeed, Germany in the middle and later 1920s was a place of cautious optimism. It had been admitted into the League of Nations, the reparations debt had become more manageable, rampant inflation was under control, and a high level of German culture was again flourishing. Right-wing extremism, including Adolf Hitler's German National Socialist Workers Party, appeared to be waning.

Then came the worldwide economic debacle of 1929. The numbers of unemployed grew each year, the parties of extreme left and right increased dramatically, and violence rose out of economic misery. As confusion and intrigue reigned, Hitler muscled his way into power as chancellor of Germany in January 1933. The democratic era of the Weimar Republic had suffered an ignoble death.

Hitler's grip on power increased during the early months of 1933 and he soon declared open war on those elements in German society—communists, socialists, Jews, gypsies, homosexuals—whom he despised. There were boycotts against Jewish stores and increased beatings of Jews and others on the Nazi enemies list. Jewish teachers were forced out of schools and universities, Jewish doctors eliminated from the program of medical insurance, Jewish shops and homes vandalized, and German citizens of Jewish heritage ruthlessly pressured to emigrate. In the spring of 1933 Albert Hirsch found himself unemployed, his lifetime academic tenure terminated after 13 years at the Woehlerschule and the family forced to move in with Lilly's parents. He wrote an old friend that he was trying to utilize his time "profitably and guard against bitterness." The next year, Hirsch, like several other former city teachers, secured a position at the Philanthropin, first as a teacher and three years later as headmaster.

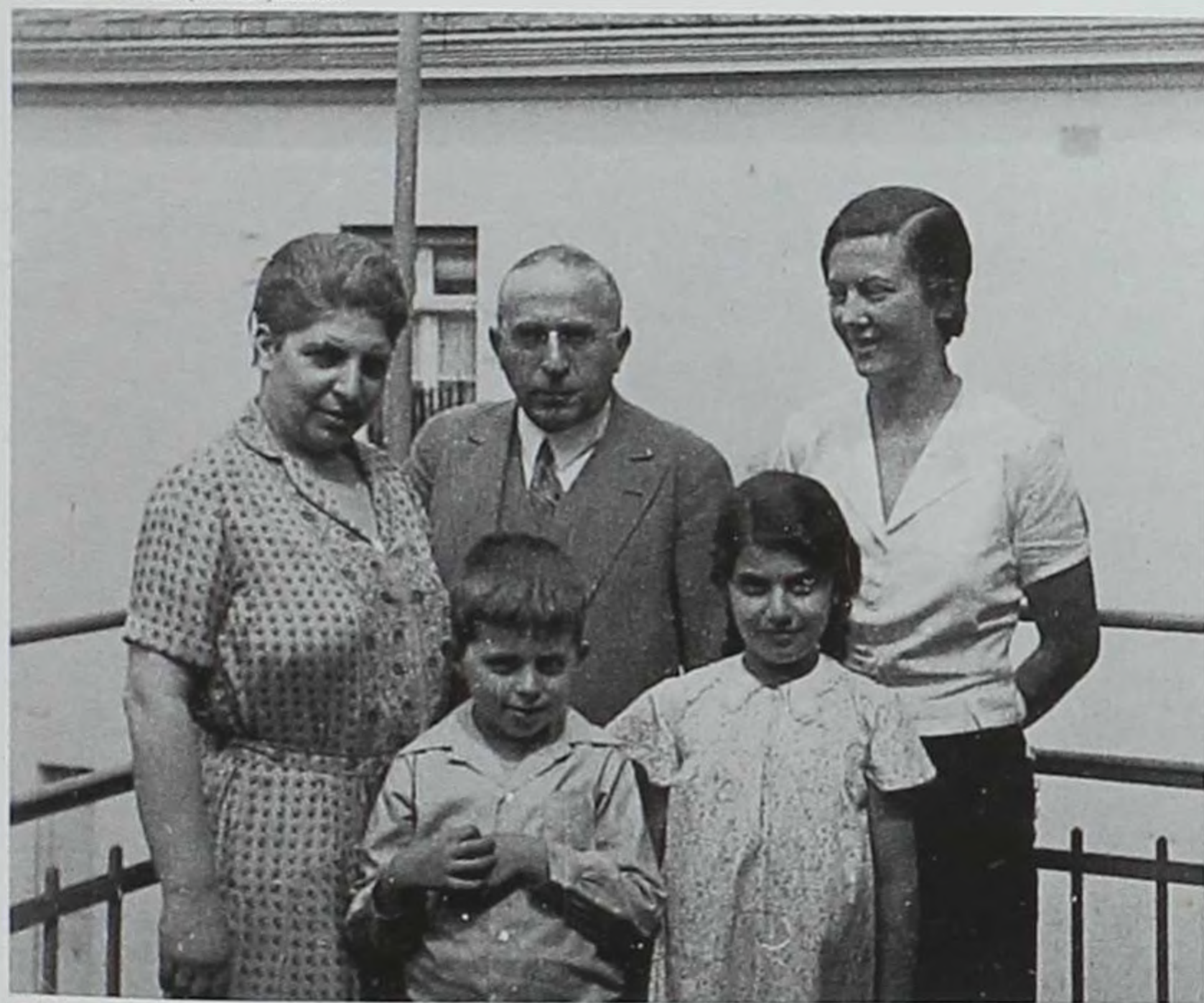
Founded in 1804, the Philanthropin had become one

COURTESY HANNA [HIRSCH] BLOCK



Albert Hirsch's father stands in the doorway of the family's butcher shop and home in Frankfurt, 1912.

COURTESY HANNA (HIRSCH) BLOCK



Albert and Lilly Hirsch stand with young Rudi and Hanna and their nurse (right) in Germany in the mid-1930s, when Hitler's oppression of the Jews was well under way. Below, an item from the *Storm Lake Pilot-Tribune*, one week after *Kristallnacht*.

of the most prestigious schools in Germany. During the 1930s its numbers grew substantially; Jewish students forced out of traditional German schools by the Nazis found their way into the Philanthropin, and enrollment reached a record 1,400. Hirsch, aware that many of these young people would be leaving Germany, wisely increased opportunities for foreign-language instruction in French, Spanish, Hebrew, and especially English.

In the fall of 1938, among other acts of oppression, the Nazis rounded up some 17,000 Polish Jews residing in Germany and deported them to a border area between Germany and Poland (Poland would not admit them). Betty Rand-Schleifer, who taught at the Philanthropin, was married to a Jew from Poland. Late on October 28, 1938, she was instructing a class of girls on the historical fate of the Jewish people. As dusk fell, the students listened to the somber lesson. Suddenly, Hirsch walked into the room and took Rand-Schleifer quietly aside. "I just now learned by telephone that several of our pupils who are Polish citizens have been arrested by the Gestapo," he told her. "I know that you have acquired Polish citizenship since your marriage. I would like to ask you to return home immediately in order to await together with your husband further developments in the situation." Rand-Schleifer gathered her books and left the school.

Two weeks later, on the night

of November 9/10, Nazi thugs unleashed unprecedented destruction against Jewish persons and property in Germany and Austria. Although most Germans did not participate in the violence and destruction of *Kristallnacht*, "the night of the broken glass," few overtly aided the victims. Almost 100 people were killed, 267 synagogues destroyed, and 7,000 Jewish businesses and homes vandalized (Jews would be fined one billion marks—\$400 million—for damage to their own property). Nearly 26,000 Jewish men were arrested throughout Germany and sent to concentration camps.

Hirsch knew his students, faculty, and probably the Philanthropin itself were in danger. The morning of the 10th, he told veteran teacher Tilly Epstein, "The Synagogues are burning in the East end. I will send the children home." Realizing he would soon be arrested and sent to a concentration camp, he quickly instructed Epstein how to carry on in his absence. The following morning he telephoned her, "It is upon us." Several hours later the Gestapo came for Hirsch. His wife's desperate pleas were ignored. Twenty-seven male teachers were arrested.

Hirsch and the others were sent to Buchenwald. Established in 1937, the concentration camp lay on the outskirts of Weimar, the city of Goethe, in one of the most beautiful areas in Germany. Several hundred inmates died at Buchenwald within the year, from harsh treatment, murder, insanity, and suicide. Hirsch, fortunately, was released within a month. Suffering from a broken ankle, he had spent much of that time in the Buchenwald infirmary—probably a stroke of good fortune, even though the ankle had to be reset in Frankfurt after his release in early December.

Kristallnacht was a decisive moment for Hirsch. "Until then," he later recalled, he thought he could "remain in the narrow vicinity of the Jewish school and area in Germany." The November pogrom "destroyed conclusively the hope for further existence of Jews in Germany."

The Hirsches already had affidavits to get them to

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 17, 1938.

DIFFICULT TO BELIEVE

It's just about impossible for Americans to visualize the terror, pillaging and rioting that the Nazis are inflicting upon the Jews and Catholics in Germany and Austria.

England and then to the United States, their preferred destination and where they had relatives. Their children were already in England through *Kindertransport*, the informal relief network that brought 10,000 Jewish and other refugee children from Germany. Albert and Lilly Hirsch departed for England in August 1939 on the last plane to leave Berlin for London before the outbreak of war. They left with only a few belongings and five dollars. Like other Jewish emigrants, they had been fleeced by the Nazis.

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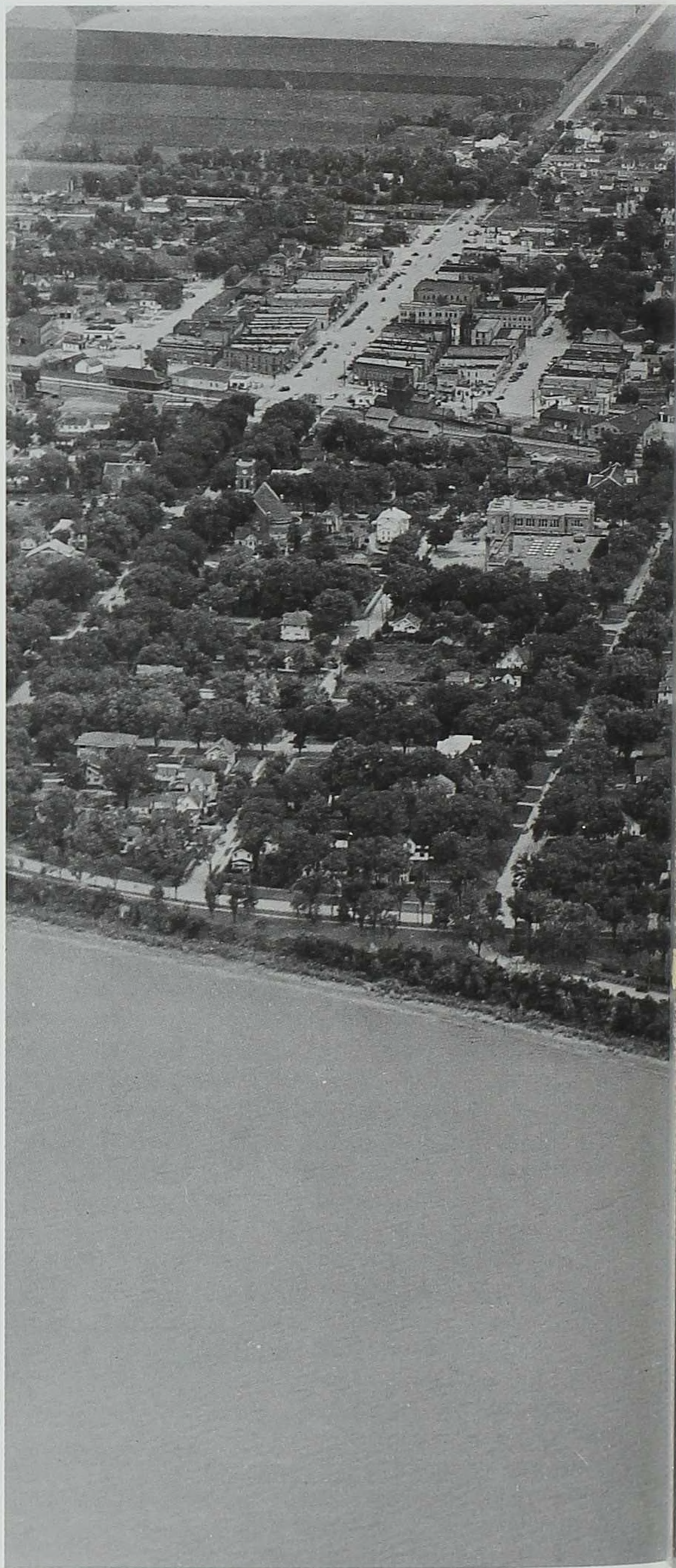
Philanthropin, much reduced in students and staff, continued for a time, but its demise was certain. The upper-level grades were ordered suspended in April 1941, and no Jewish child was permitted instruction after June 1942. The school's proud 138-year existence was at an end. Many faculty and administration found refuge in the United States, Palestine, England, Australia, South America, and South Africa. But not teacher Fannie Baer. She and two dozen others died in concentration camps.

As the Hirsches weathered the fierce Nazi bombing of Britain, Albert gained insight into the British character and ability "to do to others something good and remain yourself in the background." He and Lilly soon left London for Birmingham, to manage a refugee boys school. Then, from 1943 to 1945, Hirsch taught at King Edward's School, "one of the great old schools."

Hirsch's first day in New York—July 3, 1946—was "hot and noisy." But he and Lilly were soon on their way to Storm Lake in northwestern Iowa and their new life at Buena Vista College. The pay was barely sufficient, but the community of 8,000 was clean and safe. The streets were wide, Dutch elms formed a shady canopy over the sidewalks, a large and inviting park stretched out along the lake. One could walk at night in total safety. People did not lock their doors. "This America is again quite different from what you imagine from films or books," he wrote.

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Storm Lake, Iowa, in 1941. Albert and Lilly Hirsch arrived five years later. The community, as well as the Buena Vista campus, became their new home after World War II.



SHSI (DES MOINES): DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE



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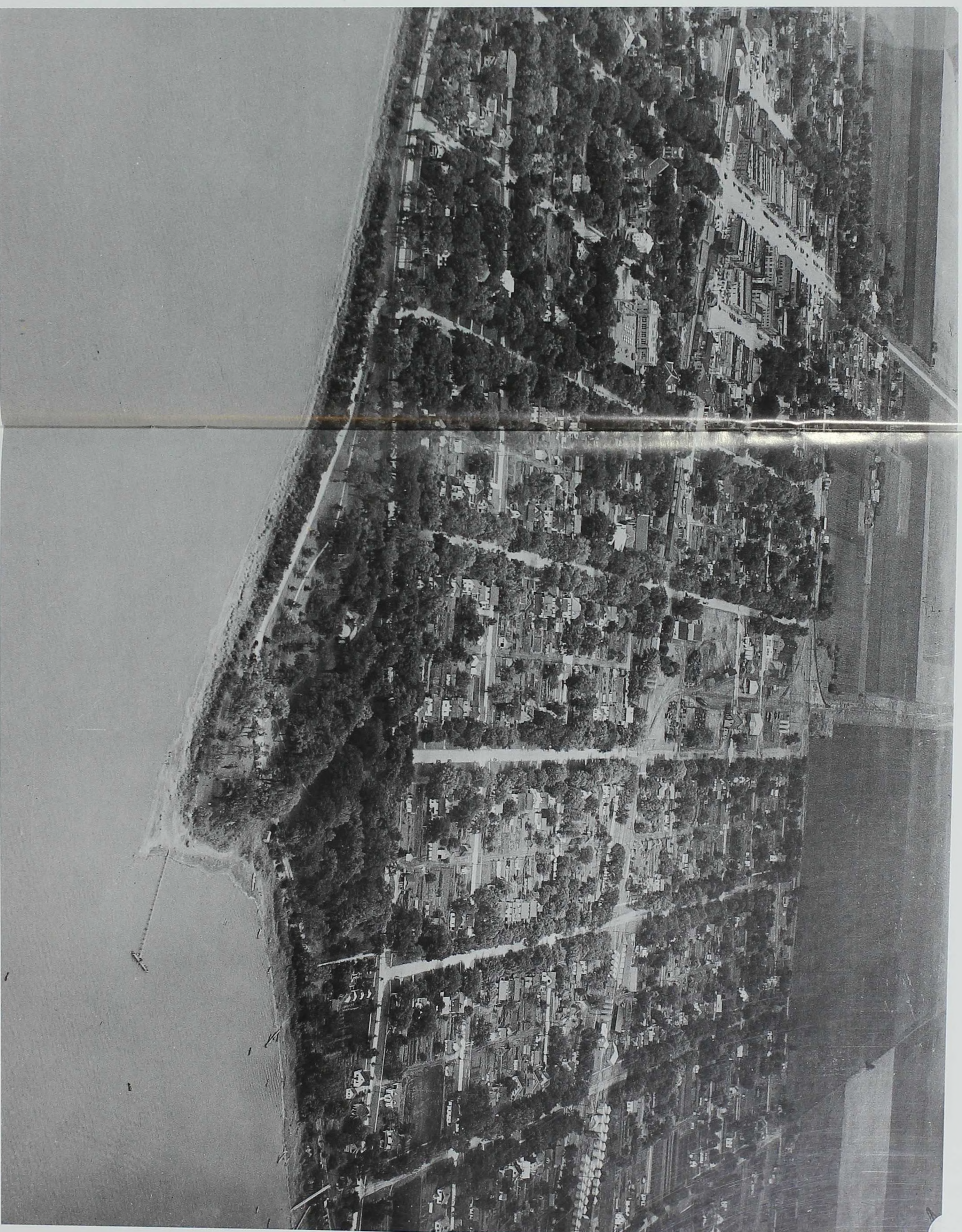
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SHS (DES MONIES); DES MONIES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE

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A Buena Vista faculty gathering in the 1950s. Albert Hirsch stands in the front center, Lilly Hirsch is on the far right.

man, Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish ancestry. He marveled that among the variety of denominations, some churches still presented sermons in Swedish or German, and he hoped he might do more with German literature in his new position. Buena Vista's faculty at that time comprised approximately 35 men and women who were primarily devoted to teaching rather than research. They were all Protestants except for Hirsch.

He found that interest in Germany was "very strong" among the older generation, whose grandparents had left Europe, and they were absolute, he noted, in their rejection of any "Nazi inclinations." As he looked at the problems in postwar Europe, he mused "that the Gestapo threw us out at the right time and saved us the misery of today's Germany." In Storm Lake, he and Lilly had a happy family life in spite of all the horrors that went before. Still, he admitted, "the heart has gotten a little crack."

Sometimes, the American version of democracy perplexed the Hirsches. When Lilly spotted Buena Vista president Jack Fisher shoveling the snow from his own sidewalk, she shook her head and remarked, "Only in America." She knew that Fisher's counterparts in Europe would do no such thing.

Waiting for citizenship, she and Albert watched with pleasure from the sidelines when in November 1948 President Truman defied the polls and won the election. Hirsch informed a friend in Europe that "the American voter did not let himself be led astray through newspapers, radio, advertising, but coolly and independently voted for whom he liked best—a piece of living democracy became visible here." When the Hirsches obtained citizenship in the early 1950s, the college held a special patriotic program in their honor.

Hirsch observed that Americans were not indifferent to the misery in postwar Europe and wanted to help. He marveled at what he interpreted as a "lack of enemy feeling." As he told local Rotarians in 1946, "Personally, I am glad that I have reached this part of America, a small city in the Middle West, where I can see the real heart of America in close perspective."

There was an open spirit at Buena Vista and no one interfered with the contents of a professor's presentation. The teaching load, however, was excessive. Although Buena Vista's austere academic program and scarcity of foreign-language professors mandated that Hirsch concentrate on elementary and intermediate courses in German and French, his contributions exceeded that, and he became a respected and popular faculty member. He occasionally lectured on Brecht,

Goethe, and Hesse. He joined Storm Lake's Great Books Club, contributed to the new county hospital, and spoke at area junior high and high schools. He chaired the Division of Language and Literature from his arrival in 1946 to his semi-retirement in 1964. When the school achieved North Central Association accreditation in 1952, his value as a European-trained scholar was noted.

Sometimes he missed the rigor of the European academic world. After the war many U.S. colleges instituted letter exchanges between their students and German students. They were, Hirsch mused, in different worlds. The American students, less interested in world views or somber intellectual content and class work, wrote about baseball, football, basketball, dances, parties, cars, and "lastly, perhaps, something about their lectures."

Buena Vista student George Christakes recalled Hirsch warmly: "He was an early morning person, so he taught German at 7:30 A.M. For two years I struggled to stay awake, and only the fact that this remarkable personality was at the front of the room enabled me to present a semblance of life in his classroom. His was not simply a course in the German language, but one in which he shared with us his profound insights into the culture of that country and people. His knowledge of opera was also interspersed into the course. I'll always remember his commentaries concerning opera when he and his wife invited me into their home to listen to the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts with them." Christakes could not forget the "twinkle in Hirsch's eyes as he encouraged students in their struggle to pronounce German," or how he asked students to "make gargling sounds before we would pronounce Bach."

Buena Vista alumnus Glenn Theulen recognized that Hirsch "brought dignity and honor to our little college." A sophomore in 1948, Theulen later remembered how even grizzled World War II veterans in their thirties were not exempt from wearing the traditional freshman beanies through homecoming. Anyone who refused fell victim to a gauntlet of paddles and a ducking in Storm Lake. One young man, however, decided to defy the beanie rule on the grounds that he was the son of the college vice-president and therefore not subject to such an indignity. His mother even tried to intervene

on his behalf. The students, however, roared their disapproval, chanting, "Off to the lake."

Suddenly, Theulen heard a German accent join the chant. "Ja, to the lake, ja, to the lake." Theulen looked around. "Right next to me stood Dr. Hirsch, dressed in his impeccable style, homburg and all with an umbrella, upholding tradition and loyalty."

SHSI (DES MOINES): DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE



Siblings Betty and Gordon McKinstrey clown for the camera in 1948. She was Buena Vista's homecoming queen; he, the quarterback. Hirsch was struck by the sometimes carefree attitudes of American students.

One of the most notable qualities of Albert and Lilly Hirsch was their lack of hatred (as distinguished perhaps from anger) towards the fatherland that had cast them out. Even though they had lost 30 family members in the Holocaust, they had no deep-rooted antagonism and no desire for vengeance. They wanted to see Germany reconstructed along democratic lines and restored to the community of nations. Democracy, Hirsch realized, "cannot be exported. It is a form of life which is in constant development." He was apprehensive lest Germans confuse democracy with the multiple political parties as they existed between 1919 and 1932. In the late 1940s, as the Cold War emerged,

he knew that there would be difficulties. "Germany is on the auction block," he told the Storm Lake Kiwanis Club in March 1950. Germans were neither democrats nor communists, "just Germans who wanted to be united." He did not think that they wanted to see American forces removed. In those days before the economic miracle had wrought its transformation, Hirsch, like others, believed it might take half a century to clear the rubble.

It was 23 years before the Hirsches returned to Germany. The opportunity came when a German commission invited Hirsch to help document the history of the Frankfurt Jews and to coauthor a history of the Philanthropin. The school had been reconstructed into a community center for scientific and arts events by what remained of the Jewish community in Frankfurt. Reunited with old friends, Hirsch was paid special tribute. Happy to again hear real "Frankfurtish," he mar-

COURTESY HANNA [HIRSCH] BLOCK



The Hirsches visited Germany in the early 1960s.

veled that "because of a little schoolmaster from America so much fuss is being made."

In Iowa, Hirsch was affectionately dubbed "Rabbi" by the tiny Storm Lake Jewish community and was its leader on special holidays. Since Storm Lake had no synagogue, the Hirsches attended services at the Mt. Sinai reformed synagogue in Sioux City, 60 miles west. As a friend recalled, Albert was more intent on attending services in Sioux City than Lilly, "who went along mostly for the ride."

When Hirsch retired from teaching in June 1966, he was honored with special awards. A humanities collection in the library was named in his honor, and scholarships were named after both him and Lilly. The

Hirsches' home in Storm Lake had long been the scene of gatherings of colleagues, students, and friends, and it remained a center of intellectual and social activity until their deaths in 1975.

Albert Hirsch never permitted personal suffering to infect him with hatred or bitterness. Still, there were times when a certain melancholy showed through his congenial nature. When a young professor once asked about his views on immortality, he shook his head and replied, "Once is enough."

Hirsch rarely spoke of his ordeal in Nazi Germany. Once when a student in his German class asked about those years, he started to explain but was overcome with emotion. But even though, as he once said, "the heart has gotten a little crack," he found nothing hopeless and moved confidently forward. The twinkle in his eye could not be diminished by adversity. He epitomized the humanity in our essence, which, for Hirsch, had been cultivated through long exposure and dedication to the liberal arts.

The memory of Hirsch was deeply etched in all those who knew him, whether in Germany or the United States. At his 80th birthday celebration in 1968, he was presented with a card that had come from afar: "Those of us who had the privilege of attending the ivory-clad Philanthropin and soaking up the teachings of 'Bobby' can never refer to ourselves as self-made." He gave his best to Buena Vista College, and the college became better because of his efforts. He not only personified Buena Vista's motto, "Education for Service," but he remained eternally true to the spirit of the Philanthropin, "Enlightenment for Humanity." ❖

William H. Cumberland is author of History of Buena Vista College and professor emeritus of history at Buena Vista University, where he taught from 1958 to 1991 and chaired the School of Social Science. He now lives in Cedar Rapids.

NOTE ON SOURCES

The author drew upon conversations and correspondence with Hanna [Hirsch] Block, Carl Adkins, George Christakes, Betty Silverberg, and Glenn Theulen for this profile, as well as upon his own research for his book, *History of Buena Vista College* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1st ed., 1966; 2nd ed., 1991). Materials compiled by Albert and Lilly Hirsch, and back issues of the *Storm Lake Pilot-Tribune* were also useful. Secondary sources include Dietrich Andernacht and Albert Hirsch, comp., *Das Philanthropin zu Frankfurt am Main, Dokumente und Erinnerung* (Frankfurt: W. Kramer, 1964); Kommission zur Erforschung der Geschichte der Frankfurter Juden, *Dokumente zur Geschichte der Frankfurter Juden, 1933-1945* (Frankfurt, 1963); Paul Arnsberg, *Die Geschichte der Frankfurter Juden seit der Franzoesischen Revolution* (Darmstadt, 1983); Victor Klemperer, *I Will Bear Witness*, vol. 1 (NY: Random House, 1998); and Eugene Mayer, *The Jews of Frankfurt: Glimpses of the Past* (Frankfurt: W. Kramer, 1990). Manuscript annotations are held in the *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* production files (State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City center).