

Warren Hirsch

Photographed with his wife Bianca

Wartime Experience: Sent to the US on a Kindertransport

I was born in Mannheim, Southern Germany, on March 27, 1922. My parents were Sally and Milly (Hausmann) Hirsch. My mother helped to make ends meet, by having boarders, so that my parents eked out a very modest livelihood. My brother, Erwin, who is eight years my senior, graduated from the Gymnasium and studied in Wuerzburg to become a Cantor. At the time of my birth, I was named Werner.

I spent the first four school years in Luisenschule and then received a scholarship which enabled me to attend the Realgymnasium for one and a half years, a college preparatory school. In 1934, the stipend was cancelled because I was Jewish and then I had to go back to the 6th grade in a "Volksschule" (public school). This meant I could not receive a higher education, even though I was a good student. Shortly after Hitler came to power, the Jewish students were harassed and beaten. Many times, I would come home with a bloody nose, although most of my immediate classmates were relatively nice to me since I was active in sports and was also liked by most of my teachers. However, things deteriorated, as it was the correct way to live for the German students – to beat up and hate the Jews. Soon I could not play with them or even talk much to them anymore. After eight years of public education, I spent one year in a Jewish school that was established and I realized that I would never be able to attend university.

Since I was quite musical, the Cantor of our Synagogue took me under his wing and taught me so that I sang not only in the choir but was given frequent solos. He introduced me to a piano teacher who gave me lessons without remuneration. She immigrated to Australia and we remained in touch until she died in 1988. The Cantor immigrated to England, and I lost contact with him until 1976, when I visited him and we stayed in touch until 1986 when he passed away.

By 1934, we could no longer go swimming. The opera house and the theaters were closed to us. Even restaurants no longer welcomed Jews. Most of these places did not affect me anyway since I could not afford them. My only affordable luxury occasionally was to attend the opera, where I sat upstairs on the side, the cheapest seats. For these we had to get in line at 6 A.M. to purchase tickets. After 1934, this too, was forbidden to Jews. When the persecution of Jews began, I wanted to leave Germany. Theoretically, I could leave, but as a fourteen-year-old boy, I had no place to go. I heard of Children's Transports (Kindertransport) to England, Australia, Palestine (Israel was not yet created) and the U.S.A. I applied to all of them and fortunately in June 1937, I was able to immigrate to the United States. My parents and brother stayed behind and it was with a heavy heart that I left them, not knowing if I would ever see them again.

I was sent to San Francisco, where I did not know a soul. However, it did not take me too long to realize that it was my good fortune to live there, as it has been said, "It's the best spot on the earth." There were about fifteen other children in San Francisco who came from Germany. We were sent to foster homes, some better, some worse, but we all received good care and proper supervision. At first, I was placed in Homewood Terrace, a Jewish Orphanage, where about two hundred children lived. Unfortunately, I could not stay there, because the orphanage was partially supported by a governmental agency and as a foreigner, I could not stay there. I was sent to a foster home, where I remained six months. My foster parents had come from Germany in 1936, and when some of their family came from Germany, they needed the space and could no longer keep me. Luckily, the man who was in charge of the orphanage, an ordained Rabbi, took a liking to me, and took me into his home. He had a house on the premises, and because I stayed with him, I was allowed to mingle with the other children. This was possibly the best time of my life. I went to high school, received piano lessons; had opportunities to play tennis, basketball, baseball, football which enabled me to become Americanized. Since I had a good voice and wanted to become a Cantor, I even received singing lessons. This lasted for one and a half years, until the Rabbi retired and moved to New York.

In the meanwhile, my brother became the Cantor in the synagogue in Mannheim and after Kristallnacht, both he and my father were sent to the concentration camp in Dachau. Because my brother was born in Strasbourg in 1914, (which became French after World War I), he was fortunate to be assigned a French quota which enabled him to leave Germany earlier when a cousin in New York was kind enough to send affidavits for my parents and brother. My brother arrived in New York in 1939 and found a position as a Cantor with a minimal salary, barely enough to live on. My father was deported to Auschwitz where he was killed and I never saw him again. My mother had lived in the United States until she was 14 years old (she was a U.S. Citizen until she married my father) so she received a preferred quota number and arrived in 1940 and lived with my brother.

After I graduated High School, I was permitted to stay in Homewood Terrace while attending the University of California. I received free room and board at that time. I realized that my voice was not good enough to become a Cantor. Since I was interested in chemistry and business, I decided to study pharmacy. I had to work part-time in order to earn the tuition, fees, books, clothes and other incidentals. It was difficult, but I graduated from college in 1944 with a degree in pharmacy. Luckily, I passed the State Board examination on the first try. In 1942, I visited my mother and brother and his wife in New York (he had married Martha Sommer in 1941) It was a thrill to see them again after five years. I was drafted into the Army but remained in the United States. After my discharge, I worked in two pharmacies and bought my own store in December 1946. It was rundown and I was able to build it up and make a good living.

In 1948, I married Bianca, whom I knew when we were children. Her father had a clothing factory and knowing our financial situation, he used to call me occasionally to pick out a shirt because I sang so nicely at the Synagogue. When he and his wife brought their two children to the United States in 1937, they visited me in San Francisco to tell my parents that I was being

properly cared for. My wife is a psychologist and we both worked and pursued our professions until recently when I retired. We have a son and a daughter who both became lawyers. They are both married and each has two children, a boy and a girl. They live in the San Francisco Bay area. We are blessed and look forward to celebrating our 50th wedding anniversary in 1998 amidst family and friends.