Funeral Speeches & Hart/Hirsh Family History 2006
Hirt/Hirsch Family History
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The Hirsh family lived in the Charlottenburg district of Berlin. Josef was head of a gas business. He had two marriages. He had two children, Alexander and Rosetta, by the first marriage. One intact artifact is a wedding album dated 18 October 1888 with photographs and typed and handwritten congratulatory telegrams. There are documents of the marriage registration. The second marriage ~ 20 year later was to Dorothea Schwabach, with whom he had two daughters, Anna Margarete born in 1911, and Susanne born in 1913. They stated that they were baptized, although Margarete recalled attending synagogue with her mother. Josef committed suicide in 1922. Susanne said her Uncle Herman Hirsch committed suicide when Hitler came to power. As we discussed on the phone, Rosette Hirsch donated written material relating to Herman Hirsch's life and work to the Leo Baeck Institute. Susanne's estate includes many original oil landscape paintings by Herman, as well as pastel and line drawing of family members. One such drawing is of Sue holding her favorite doll. The porcelain faced doll in what appears to be original clothing is one of Sue's treasured possessions. Susanne has original notebooks and photographs and even school reports from Jahre Wald Oberschule, the school she and Margaret attended. She has notebooks and reports and a letter from a professor she studied with while a degree candidate from 1931-1934 at the University of Berlin, before, as she said, "Hitler kicked me out of medical school". There are many letters written during the War by their mother, Dorothea, who remained in Berlin. The letters, some in German and some in English, some handwritten and some typed, were written to Susanne, who escaped to the United States as a domestic servant, and to Margarete, who escaped to England and worked with refugee children. Post-war material documents that Dorothea was deported to and died in Riga.

After the War, Margarete volunteered with the American Army, and was sent as a translator to Germany. There are many letters written by "Civilian A.M. Hirsch" from Germany to Susanne in Wisconsin. Later, Margaret came to the USA where she attended college and then worked until retirement as a social worker in Cincinnati, Ohio. She then moved to Richmond Va., and lived with her sister Susanne. She remained active as a volunteer with Jewish Family Services, was involved in a fledgling ultra-reform synagogue, helped to sponsor and settle immigrant families, and, copies of letters she wrote to politicians indicate that she was active politically and pursued social justice. At times she kept diaries that reflect on her life, and these papers are part of the collection. She was interviewed in a book, Emigrierte Sozialarbeiter: Portraits Vertriebener sozialarbeiter Innen, by Lamberts, c 1995, about social workers who fled Nazi Germany. Margarete died Jan. 31, 2000, and is buried in the Emek Sholom Holocaust Memorial Cemetery.

I know the least about Rosetta Hirsch. Documents support that she was a pianist who received a certificate from the Royal Schools of Music in 1951. She may have been in England or in Switzerland during the War. Sometime later, Rosetta came to the USA, and lived in Richmond VA. She was a music teacher, and at the end of her life lived with Susanne. She died in 1965 and is buried in the Emek Sholom Holocaust Memorial Cemetery next to Margarete. Rosetta left beautiful German books, many from the late 1890's. They include sheet music, Lieder, biographies of composers, philosophy, poetry, and some children's books. There are books on poetry and literature books from England. Rosetta also left journals written in German about her life.

After Susanne was forced to withdraw from medical school, she studied gymnastics in Switzerland and Vienna, and eventually was able to leave Europe. She told of traveling through
Europe and taking a ship "as luggage" from Turkey, essentially as an au pair for a German family who was moving to the United States. I think she came in 1938. Her employer did not want to have anyone in his household with a German name, therefore it was in the United States that she felt forced to change her name from Hirsch to Hirt. Three years after Miss Hirt arrived in the USA, she was given the opportunity to teach anatomy at the Univ. of Wisconsin, Madison as her credentials from medical school in Berlin had been recognized. At the same time she was an Instructor in Anatomy, she was enrolled in a certificate program in Physical Therapy. She later earned a BS in Physical Therapy. She has made her home in Richmond since 1945 when she was hired by the Medical College of Virginia (MCV) to teach Anatomy in the new School of Physical Therapy. She earned a Master degree in Education from Univ. of Virginia in 1952. She became Director and later Chair of the Physical Therapy Department at MCV, a position she retained until her retirement in 1982. Having studied with Sister Kenny in Wisconsin, she applied her approach to the treatment of polio of which there was an epidemic during her first fifteen years at MCV. Many years later she worked intensively with the survivors of this epidemic who were enrolled in “post-polio” classes. During her tenure as Chair of the Physical Therapy Department, she published papers and was a leader in national and international meetings and professional associations. She earned some of the highest honors in the field, including the McMillan Lecture Award in 1981.

In 1979, even before Miss Hirt retired from MCV, she began to study the Feldenkrais Method, created by Moshe Feldenkrais, an Israeli physicist who applied the principles of physics to human movement. After retiring in 1982 (at age 69), Sue Hirt was one of the first to teach the Feldenkrais Method in Richmond, and she started a Feldenkrais class for senior citizens at the Shepherd Center that others continue to teach today. She was a highly regarded practitioner, and she continued to see patients in her home until her 89th year. At age 92, Miss Hirt is now frail with memory issues, and is living in a home for elderly.

Miss Hirt has documents on her academic studies in Germany, a letter from one of her medical school professors regarding her student status, school notebooks, and German textbooks in psychology, medicine, and gymnastics.

All in all, these remarkable German sisters who were tagged for the Final Solution not only survived, but also made significant contributions to society. They have made a positive difference in our world. Their lives, and the lives of their parents and extended family are well represented in material possessions that have extraordinary historic value. Their story also contains a hidden story: how did these refugees end up with such an extensive amount of personal and family possessions? Did they have friends in Berlin who hid their possessions and later located the survivors, relinquished the possessions including valuables such as silver, and shipped them overseas after the War? Were the goods warehoused somewhere during the War, and the survivors later located and reunited with their possessions?
Funeral of Sue Hirt, Remarks by Inge Horowitz. Emek Sholom Holocaust Memorial Cemetery, Forest Lawn, Richmond VA. September 18, 2006

The lesser-known story of Sue Hirt is the tale of three sisters - from one of the leading families of Berlin at the turn of the Century - but that only gradually became apparent. Some of us like to look for relationships and then network, but Sue was not one of these. I knew her as a very private person, who reserved a special place in her life for each of the people she knew. And so it took me some time, with help from Rosetta's writings and Anne Marie Perel's translations, to put it all together.

In the late 1940's I met the rotund, jovial, musical Rosetta Hirsch - pianist at parties of the New American Jewish Club. In the early 1950's, the formidable Professor Susanne Hirt was introduced to me and my classmates as coordinator of the medical courses in RPI's Department of Occupational Therapy - but I never could have guessed that there was a relationship between Sue and Rosetta, they were so different! Many years went by, Rosetta died, and when the caring, wonderful, retired social worker Margarete Hirsch called me to ask for help with one of the children of the Cambodian family she had adopted, I became reacquainted with the now elderly Professor Hirt, Margarete's unlikely younger sister! Despite Sue's tendency to compartmentalize, the three of us soon became friends. Margarete died in January 2000, and Sue was so lonely! She pasted pictures of her dear sister all over the house, and she talked about how much she missed her - constantly.

Slowly and gradually I was privileged to enter the circle of Sue's disparate friends - those two angels who became her incredibly efficient and caring Guardians, Bruce Gould and Ruth Shapiro. Others included Mary Anne McDonald, B.J. Seymour, Nancy Belcher, Janet Schwarz, Anne Fischer, Rabbi Koller, Steve Gudas, Jo-Anne Meyers, Otto Payton, her concerned neighbors the Brocks, and wonderful caregiver Cynthia Smith. We visited, took her to lunch at the Waffle House, celebrated her birthdays (when she would sit on Harold's lap), and we tried to add joy and a sense of security to her lonely later years - as her mind and her health began to fail.

Sue spent her last year at the Harborough Road Comfort Care, assisted living home. There, devoted caregivers Sissy, Denise, Keri, Karyn, Jean, Ashley, and others were augmented by the faithful friends who visited regularly.

Maybe she was so beloved because she had such depth, and one had to work to really get to know her. But I think we would all agree that the effort was immensely worthwhile. The passing of this tiny person will leave a huge void.
Funeral Speech for Susanne Hirt by Ruth Shapiro, September 18, 2006, Emek Sholom.

Sue died yesterday, shortly after her 93rd birthday.

One could write a book about what happened in the first 25 years of Sue’s life, from 1913 to 1938.

Born in Berlin, Germany, Sue was a child during the first World War. Later, she was expelled from medical school because of her Jewish ancestry. As she used to say, “Hitler kicked me out of medical school.” She then studied gymnastics in Switzerland and Vienna—I think this was what we would call kinesiology—and was in Vienna when the Germans occupied Austria. In fact, she recalled looking out from a second story window as Adolph Hitler marched in a parade, and she queried what would have happened if she had had a pistol. Can one person change the world? Shortly after, she fled through Europe and sailed from Turkey to America. She used to say she “came as luggage.” She was fortunate to leave Nazi occupied Europe before it was too late, before, as she said, “Hitler killed my mother.”

One could write a second book about what she did in the next 44 years, from 1938 until she retired in 1982.

Step by step, she claimed a place for herself in the healing professions. At UW-Madison, she became a physical therapist while teaching anatomy. She earned a Masters in Education at UVA. She advanced up the academic ladder until she became Chair of the prestigious Physical Therapy Department at Medical College of Virginia. She did research and published papers. She was renowned as a teacher. Many of you here today could tell us much more about these years. She received deserved recognition locally, for example the 1984 YWCA Outstanding Woman of the Year Award in the category of Health and Fitness. She received deserved recognition nationally. For example, she was elected to deliver the 16th Mary McMillian Lecture in 1981, a unique and key lecture sponsored by the American Physical Therapy Assoc. She spent 6 months at physical therapy schools as a visiting scholar in Israel. For pleasure, she played the violin well enough to perform with the University of Richmond Orchestra.

In 1982, at age 69, Sue could have retired and taken it easy. But then, there might not be so much rich material for the third book.

When I met Sue in 1991, 9 years after she retired, she was beginning her new career as a Feldenkrais Practitioner. She so inspired me that I decided to become a Feldenkrais practitioner, and that takes 4 years. I was so impressed with Sue’s knowledge of the human body that I decided to go to Physical Therapy school first. Although she told me that was not necessary, she supported me fully, and wrote a letter of recommendation. When I was studying anatomy, she gave me her bone collection. She made available her incredible resources of books and materials, and most significant, her time and her disciplined yet creative thinking skills. Later, she did the same with her Feldenkrais resources. I remember thinking that I would be satisfied if I knew half as much as she claimed to have forgotten. When I would return from a Training session, she would say, “what did you learn”? Much of my deep learning would occur during our explorations. One question, “what is the difference between Physical Therapy and the Feldenkrais Method” I may be able to answer in a decade or so.
Funeral Speech for Susanne Hirt by Ruth Shapiro, September 18, 2006, Emek Sholom.

She taught me to respect each human as a unique individual. She told me never to ask a patient or a client to do something that I had not tried. She said, “One must have awareness of one’s own body to be able to help others to become aware of their bodies” and, “awareness is the most important step toward recovery from bodily damage and pain”.

In essence, Sue was a gifted teacher. She loved to teach. Even later, when Alzheimer’s was robbing her precious memory, she would light up when asked about her teaching experience, and would give profound answers to simple questions.

She liked to help others. I remember several Friday evenings when my husband and I were at Congregation Or Ami. When Sue was there, I would observe what happened after services. Almost everyone else would head to the back of the room for refreshments. Sue would remain at her seat as various people approached her for advice: this was Sue’s Friday night clinic.

She liked to help others, but did not like to receive help for herself. She would only ask for help for herself in a true emergency.

Sue liked to highlight strengths. She had many. She did an amazing job caring for her sister Margarete. She was exceptionally successful treating clients with complex diagnoses. She told me that many PT’s and MD’s sent her patients when conventional therapy failed, because they knew that she could help. After Margarete died, she tried to hide from her friends the burdens of managing daily life that she was experiencing due to her advancing age and failing memory. From this, I gleaned another lesson: there are consequences to hiding your weaknesses.

Finally, this past year, when she moved out of her house she learned how to receive help from us, her friends, and from the caregivers at Comfort Care, the assisted living facility where she died in her sleep yesterday morning. Many of her caregivers from Comfort Care are here today. I thank you. Many of her friends and neighbors are here today. Many of her colleagues are here today: academic faculty from VCU, PT clinicians, and Feldenkrais Practitioners.

Sue, we are saying good-by to you today. We are grateful for having been a part of your life, and proud of the legacy you have left us. Yes, I think one person can make a difference: you did. So for me, and I think for many others, Sue Hirt will continue to be a teacher and a role model on how to be a human being.