

**WELCOMING REMARKS TO
CLARK UNIVERSITY'S
MAY TERM RETREAT**

**LEIR HOUSE
RIDGEFIELD, CONNECTICUT**

SATURDAY, APRIL 4, 2009

I am Arthur Hoffman, President of The Leir Charitable Foundations. Margot Gibis is Program Manager for The Leir Retreat Center, and together, we welcome you all to Ridgefield in the Spring.

We welcome old friends:

- President John Bassett;
- Professor Walter Schatzberg;
- Professor SunHee Kim Gertz;
- Professor Uwe Gertz;
- a new friend from Clark University, Professor Robert Tobin, the new holder of The Henry J. Leir Chair in Foreign Languages and Literature;
- Dr. Jack Fong, past Chairman of the Department of Pediatrics of Danbury Hospital; and
- students of the May Term in Luxembourg Program.

I want to devote my remarks to the students on a subject I have not discussed before.

I have often spoken of Henry Leir as an inspiration for young people. He persevered, succeeded financially – as is obvious as soon as you drive onto his property – and he left virtually all of his wealth to charity.

It is a good and true story. But does it have any relevance to you today? After all, you face very challenging economic times: scholarships and student aid will be harder to come by; part-time work will be hard to find; and jobs to begin your career are not exactly “low-hanging fruit.” What chance do you have to succeed in this financial crisis? And how long will the crisis last?

So, can Henry Leir still be viewed as an inspiration in the challenging economic times we face today? Damn right he can! More than ever! Let me tell you about young Henry.

In many talks, I have said that Henry Leir was born in the Prussian portion of Germany just weeks after the close of the 19th Century, on January 28, 1900. He was the eldest of six children when his father died. He became “the man of the family” at age 11. He couldn’t go to a university; he had to work to support his family.

What were the economic conditions in Germany when he went out to start his career? Any problems? Yes; there were quite a few.

When young Henry was 14, World War I began. Germany had ambitious plans; when it won, it would annex rich industrial lands from France on the West, and also Eastern Europe, and take over their mineral-rich colonies. And so, the Reich borrowed heavily to finance its war machine.

However, the Reich lost, and under the Armistice of November 11, 1918, and the Treaty of Versailles, Germany was disarmed and its army disbanded. On the West, it gave up Alsace-Lorraine, and the Saarland to France, and land in the North to Denmark. And most of Prussia, where Henry Leir was born, went to Poland. Germany also had to pay reparations to France and Belgium and other allies, in the form of ships, trains, coal and gold.

At this time, when Henry Leir was 18, the Kaiser and the Generals pronounced that Germany lost only because it was the victim of a “secret, planned, demagogic campaign.” That theme infected German ultra-nationalistic politics with a growing fever thereafter, as I will talk about in a moment.

But first let me tell you about the hard-to-believe economic effects:

Before World War I, the dollar was worth 4 marks. In 1919, the mark was 47 to the dollar; in July, 1923, it was 353,000 to the dollar; and in November 1923, it was 4 trillion to the dollar. Employees used wheelbarrows to collect their wages and ran to the stores to shop before prices escalated. German prices had reached a billion times their pre-war value – the greatest hyperinflation ever. The Dawes Plan and a new Reichmark ended the economic plunge.

And Henry Leir was 23 years old.

The recovery did not last long. After just a few years, by the late 1920s, German industry became dependent on foreign investment. **Then came the Great Depression.** On Black Thursday, October 24, 1929, the U.S. Stock Market collapsed, and soon U.S. banks called their short-term loans to German industry. Between 1929 and 1932, German industrial production fell precipitously and one in three workers was unemployed.

From hyperinflation to depression, **all within Henry Leir's 20s.** Helluva time for him to make a living!

But financial pressures were not life-threatening. **Something else was,** and Henry Leir lived with a sword hanging over his head.

In 1919, a 30 year old army corporal joined the German Worker's Party. Hitler was born in Austria in 1889; he was 11 years older than Henry Leir. The Party gave Hitler an opportunity to express his beliefs, which were grounded in the theme that the World War I German army did not lose – rather, they were “stabbed in the back by the Jews.” Hitler came to be the Party spokesman, and refining his propaganda techniques, he said:

The receptivity of the great masses is very limited, their intelligence is small, but their power of forgetting is enormous. In consequence of these facts, all effective propaganda must be limited

to a very few points and must harp on those slogans until the last member of the public understands what you want him to understand by your slogan.

Applying this rhetorical method, Hitler condemned the Jews as “corruptors, traitors and the cause of the sacrifice of millions on the battlefield.” Hitler regretted that Jews had not been gassed; but now, he said, they should be strung up.

The National Socialist German Workers Party, “The Nazis” was formed in 1920. The party fulfilled Hitler’s edicts. It expanded street violence, built its paramilitary, “The Brownshirts”, but also built its influence over the German population, and its voting power in the Reichstag.

Hitler was sworn in as Reich Chancellor on January 30, 1933, and soon thereafter began his terror campaign leading to the Holocaust. Henry and Erna Leir had crossed the border, from Germany into Luxembourg, **early in January 1933, just weeks before.**

And there they remained until 1938, when, expecting Hitler’s invasion of Luxembourg and aware of the terror campaign, they left for the United States, once again leaving everything behind. **Henry Leir was 38 years old.**

The facts about Germany I have cited come from an extraordinary book called *The Coming of the Third Reich*, by Richard J. Evans. The Publisher is Penguin. The author is Professor of Modern History at Cambridge.

I said at the outset that, even now, Henry Leir's success can inspire us. We live in troubling times, but no international tribunal has given Washington, Oregon, Maine and New Hampshire to Canada, nor Texas, New Mexico and Arizona to Mexico. The U.S. Dollar has deflated slowly; and we haven't suffered a Depression – not yet. And, at least at the national political level, no one has publicly advocated that some among us should be gassed or strung up.

Mr. Leir lived through times which were challenging far beyond anything we and our children and grandchildren – we hope and pray – will ever see. He was very self-disciplined, highly intelligent and ambitious. But so are you, as conclusively evidenced by the fact that you are students at Clark!

Whatever Mr. Leir accomplished in his day is accomplishable today.

ADDENDUM

The Board of The Leir Charitable Foundations tries to make known the extent of the philanthropic legacy of Henry and Erna D. Leir, and so, permit me to extend the effort to you.

On the occasion of the 10th anniversary of Mr. Leir's death last July, I said the following to the Board:

It is an awesome list of philanthropic accomplishments bearing their names:

- There are 10 Leir chairs at universities and medical institutions: Tufts, Clark, Brandeis, New Jersey Institute of Technology, Hebrew University, Hadassah and Weizmann Institute.
- There are Leir medical interns at Beth Israel and Yale; Leir scholars at Tufts; Leir curators at The Jewish Museum; a Leir residence hall at Brandeis; Leir medical research programs; a Leir Holocaust Survivors' shelter at Self-Help; a Leir headquarters building at Ability Beyond Disability; a Leir Great Hall at the Montclair Museum; Leir galleries in Luxembourg and at The Aldrich Museum; a Leir art acquisition fund; Leir annual lectures; Leir annual concerts in Luxembourg; Leir pediatric programs at Danbury Hospital; Leir Library programs, along with events taking place at The Leir Ridgefield property and many other Leir designations.