

# An American Witness in Nazi Frankfurt

The Diaries of Robert W. Heingartner, 1928-1937

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# INTRODUCTION

In 1931, the energetic US consul-general to Berlin, George S. Messersmith, on an informal inspection visit to Frankfurt, exhorted the US consular officials there to act as “the eyes and ears of the Department of State”.<sup>1</sup> In the 1920s and 1930s, the increasingly professionalized US consular corps in Germany were precisely that, in addition to their other roles of conducting the full range of consular services for Germans wishing to travel to or trade with the United States, or rendering assistance to Americans in Germany when necessary. US consular officials were required to compile regular reports for the Department of State on economic and political matters. In doing so, they drew heavily on newspapers and periodicals, and published official statistical data, but they also interviewed contacts in the world of commerce and industry, and used their own eyes and ears in the cities in which they lived. A scholar of American-German relations has recently described American consular reports as “a treasure trove of uncensored information on the ‘Third Reich’ that so far has been largely ignored by historians”.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, most of the original consular reports from Germany from the 1930s appear to have been lost or destroyed.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, relatively few US consuls have been known to have left personal papers (with a few exceptions, of whom George Messersmith was one), and historians have made relatively little use of these to date.<sup>4</sup>

A US consular official who maintained a range of useful contacts, was fluent in the language, lived in the local community, studied the local press and other publications, but who also had access to uncensored outside sources of information, and who was well-informed on economic

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1 Diary, 29 September 1931.

2 Christoph Strupp, “Observing a Dictatorship: American Consular Reporting on Germany, 1933-1941”, *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute Washington DC*, 39, Fall 2006, p.80.

3 *Ibid.*, p.85. Copies of some of Robert W. Heingartner’s reports from Frankfurt (up to 1930) are held in the Ohio Historical Society. (<http://web2.ohiohistory.org>).

4 *Ibid.*, pp.84-85.

and financial conditions, could constitute a very useful informant, for the Department of State then, and for historians now, if only they had access to his knowledge and thoughts. There is, therefore much in the diaries of Robert Wayne Heingartner, who recorded events in Frankfurt am Main from 1928 to 1937, that is of value to historians interested in the end of the Weimar Republic and the rise and consolidation of the Nazi regime up to the end of 1937.

Robert W. Heingartner was in many ways well-equipped for his long term of service as a consular official in Frankfurt, then and now one of the most important consular postings in Europe. Heingartner was of German-American background – one of his grandfathers was from Giessen, within an hour by rail from Frankfurt. He was born in 1881 in Canton, Ohio, the son of a US consul, who had been posted to Europe, and he was educated in public schools in Ohio and by private tutors in Europe.<sup>5</sup> Following in his father's footsteps, he became a career foreign service officer, beginning his career in Carini, Italy, in 1904, as a consular agent. He was then posted to Trieste as a deputy consul (1904-1906) and then to Vienna (1907-1917). He was in Austria at the time of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand (he later recalled standing on the Ringstrasse in Vienna, watching the sombre repatriation of the Archduke's body from Sarajevo), and he experienced the outbreak of the First World War in Austria. He was vice consul in Vienna from 1915 to 1917. When the United States entered the war against the Central Powers, Heingartner was temporarily attached to the Spanish Embassy in Vienna for the rest of the conflict. After the war, he spent time with the American Legation at Berne, Switzerland, subsequently returning to Vienna where he served as vice-consul. In Vienna, in January 1920, he married Lily Kraus, the daughter of a wealthy assimilated Jewish family. Robert and Lily Heingartner seem to have greatly enjoyed their life in Vienna, where they took part in the life of a well-to-do upper-middle-class couple. Lily was an accomplished amateur painter and took a strong interest in the arts, although the

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5 Biographical information on Heingartner (1881-1945) is drawn from *Who's Who in America, 1944-1945* (Chicago, 1945); *Who was Who in America, Vol.2* (Chicago, 1950); the Robert W. Heingartner diaries, 1926-1937, typescript, property of the Heingartner family; and conversations with Mrs. Gladys Graykowski (Heingartner's daughter), Sydney, 1991; private communications (by email) with Dr Alexander Heingartner, 2009-2010.

couple's tastes did not run to the contemporary avant-garde. They knew and mingled with such figures in Vienna's cultural life as Emmerich Kálmán and Franz Léhar.

Heingartner's next posting was a stark contrast to the pleasures of Vienna (even if these were somewhat dulled during the inflation years of the early 1920s). In 1926, he became US consul at Kaunas (or Kovno, as Americans then called it) in September 1926. With Vilnius (Wilna) under Polish control and the subject of a bitter diplomatic dispute between Lithuania and Poland, Kaunas was something of a makeshift capital, which still bore the character of a neglected provincial outpost of the former Tsarist Russian Empire, to which it had belonged less than a decade earlier. With what seem to have been his characteristic good nature and even temper, Heingartner made the best of the hardship post, and made friends with other members of the small foreign community there. In December 1926, Heingartner witnessed the putsch carried out by the right-wing admirer of Mussolini, Augustinas Voldemaras, which led to Voldemaras becoming Prime Minister, under the veteran nationalist leader, Antanas Smetona.<sup>6</sup>

In July 1928, Heingartner left Kaunas to take up a new position in the US consulate in Frankfurt am Main.<sup>7</sup> After the embassy and consulate-general in Berlin, the Frankfurt consulate was perhaps the most important American post in Germany in this period. As Heingartner wrote, the Frankfurt consular district comprised "a part of Prussia (the province of Hesse-Nassau except the enclaves of Kreis Rinteln and Kreis Schmalkalden), the entire state of Hesse and a part of Bavaria – the Palatinate but without the Saar district".<sup>8</sup> The Saar district was added to the Frankfurt consulate's domain in January 1935 after the territory's reincorporation into the German Reich. This was an area of great

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6 On Heingartner's period in Kaunas, and for excerpts from his diaries from this time, see Andrew G. Bonnell, "America's Man in Kaunas, 1926-28: Notes from a Diary", *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 28, 3, Fall 1997, pp.255-270. An edition of Heingartner's diaries from Lithuania has recently been published by the distinguished Lithuanian historian Alfred Erich Senn: Robert W. Heingartner, *Lithuania in the 1920s. A Diplomat's Diary* (ed. Alfred Erich Senn), Amsterdam and New York, 2009.

7 In his diary, Heingartner uses the spelling Frankfort. I have retained this spelling in his original text, to help retain the period flavour of the original, but use the German form Frankfurt in the notes and introduction.

8 Diary, 15 January 1930.

economic importance. Frankfurt was the home of the giant German chemical conglomerate, IG Farben, one of Germany's leading exporters. The consular area was also a major exporter of leather goods, and after the abolition of prohibition in the United States (an American phenomenon which was the subject of much uncomprehending ridicule in Germany), Rhenish wine producers sought to export to the United States on a large scale again. Not far from Frankfurt, in Rüsselsheim, General Motors took over an automobile factory and built up its German subsidiary Opel, so that the firm would be well-positioned to take advantage of the pent-up demand for private cars in Germany. Frankfurt had also traditionally been an important financial centre, although by the 1920s the city's old private banks were increasingly overshadowed by the modern joint-stock corporate banks based in Berlin and elsewhere. Frankfurt was therefore a prime vantage point for assessing the state of German-American economic relations, and the state of the German economy in general.

In November 1929, Heingartner started to register the slow-down in business activity that followed the Wall Street Crash. In that same month, his daughter Gladys's school class were asked to start collecting toys for the children of poor families. Some of Heingartner's wealthy acquaintances were still able to enjoy a high standard of living, but even one of the top Frankfurt hotels, the Frankfurter Hof, had to curtail the lavishness of its New Year's Eve celebrations. Unemployment, already a cause of concern in Germany before the stock market crash, worsened, and with it signs of communist unrest in Frankfurt increased. The municipal government of Frankfurt came under growing financial pressure, which affected spending on transport, cultural institutions, and other areas of local government responsibility. Heingartner was able to gauge the effects of the depression in the apparently inexorable decline of trade between the Frankfurt consular district and the United States. Consular fees were reduced to a trickle, and staff had to be reduced.

In the summer of 1930, following the premature dissolution of the Reichstag by Chancellor Heinrich Brüning, who lacked a parliamentary majority for his harsh austerity policies, Heingartner began to notice increasing evidence of Nazi political activity in Frankfurt. The Nazi movement had previously been relatively marginal in the city, which had enjoyed a reputation of being a centre of liberalism. However, the September 1930 elections suddenly saw the Nazi party (NSDAP) win

107 Reichstag seats, and become a major force in politics from then on. The NSDAP started to publish its own Frankfurt local newspaper, the *Frankfurter Volksblatt*. Heingartner was a keen observer of election campaigns, which provided him with plenty with which to keep himself occupied during 1932, a year of almost ceaseless electoral campaigning in Germany. Frankfurt was not spared the round of Nazi rallies and parades, along with the electioneering of other parties. After the Reichstag election of 31 July 1932, Heingartner expressed the view that “democracy does not work in Germany”,<sup>9</sup> and he began to see a Nazi takeover of power as inevitable, despite the reverse the NSDAP experienced in the elections in early November, when it lost two million votes. Heingartner’s views were those of a fairly conservative Germanophile, who had much sympathy with German grievances over the Treaty of Versailles. However, once Hitler was in power, Heingartner was soon repelled by the Nazis’ rhetoric and methods.

After Hitler’s appointment as Chancellor on 30 January 1933, Heingartner’s diary described the process of the Nazi takeover of power in Frankfurt. After the incessant election campaigning, the Reichstag fire, the suppression of the Communist Party and persecution of Social Democrats, and as the streets of Frankfurt filled with men in Nazi uniforms, Heingartner wrote two days after the 5 March Reichstag election:

For better or for worse Germany is now in the clutches of the ‘brown shirts’ who are ready to carry out Hitler’s commands. Hackenkreuz [sic] flags are being raised on public buildings all over the Reich. The Third Reich began right after the election.<sup>10</sup>

Heingartner described the establishment of Nazi rule at the local level. Local Nazi activists in Frankfurt began book-burnings (9 March) and harassing Jewish-owned businesses even before these were ordered at the national level. By the end of April 1933, Heingartner already sensed that people in Frankfurt were “probably getting tired of these very frequent fascist demonstrations”.<sup>11</sup> This tallies with the findings of William Sheridan Allen’s classic study of the North German town of

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9 Diary, 1 August 1932.

10 Diary, 7 March 1933. (*Hakenkreuz* = swastika).

11 Diary, 26 April 1933.

Northeim, which discovered that after the initial enthusiasm of mass mobilization of NSDAP supporters at the time of the “National Revolution”, routinization and weariness with the endless parades and rallies quickly set in, along with a general retreat to the private sphere.<sup>12</sup> Heingartner also described the repression of all opposition in the months after the Nazi takeover – the establishment of concentration camps and the imprisonment of thousands for political offences were public knowledge. The brother of Gladys Heingartner’s schoolteacher was among those arrested for anti-Nazi activities.

Conformity with the regime’s norms was soon enforced: Frankfurters found themselves obliged to eat the austerity one-pot stew Sunday lunch once a month, with the savings to be donated to the *Winterhilfe* (Winter relief) charity. SA men would go from door to door to check on people’s kitchens, to ensure compliance. Fund-raising drives were frequent, becoming an informal mode of taxation, with pedestrians on Frankfurt streets having to buy the latest fund-raising pin to be able to avoid the further attentions of tin-rattling brownshirts. (Young Alexander Heingartner soon acquired a large collection of such pins and badges.)

Along with the forced conformity, Heingartner also records the grumbling, the anti-regime jokes, and the rumours that sprang up to fill the gaps in the regime-controlled press. Heingartner was fluent in German, and lived among German servants, neighbours, tradespeople and consulate employees. Perhaps his manner aroused people’s trust, or perhaps as a foreign official he was considered unlikely to be a Gestapo informant: either way, Germans he mixed with were remarkably candid about their opinions of the regime. This was despite the fact that Germans soon became aware of the dangers of being denounced to the Gestapo for careless talk in public, something that Heingartner’s chronicle also recorded.

One of the main complaints people expressed about the regime concerned the growing shortages by 1935 of foodstuffs like butter, eggs and meat, and a range of commodities, especially anything imported. As a consular official, Heingartner had means of buying goods from abroad, but even as a relatively privileged individual, he experienced increasing difficulty in obtaining some commodities. The increasingly tight restrictions on foreign exchange, and the pressure on some consumer

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12 W. S. Allen, *The Nazi Seizure of Power*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1989, revised edn.

goods supplies caused by the drive for autarky, or self-sufficiency, caused inconvenience to many Germans. While the Nazis trumpeted claims of an economic recovery, and I.G. Farben started to do conspicuously well out of the drive to produce synthetic substitutes for strategic imports, many ordinary Germans found themselves having to tighten their belts.<sup>13</sup>

Heingartner was in a good position to monitor the state of Germany's export industries, as he measured the flow of exports to the United States from the Frankfurt consular district by the number and value of invoices the consulate issued. Travel was cut down by the draconian foreign currency restrictions, but the Zeppelin route between Frankfurt and Lakehurst, New Jersey, provided Heingartner with a new task: making out the bill of health for the *Hindenburg* as it departed Frankfurt airport. This traffic ceased after the destruction of the *Hindenburg* by fire as it docked at Lakehurst in May 1937. Heingartner was more moved by this than most contemporaries, having furnished those on board with visas and certified the airship's bill of health.

Frankfurt had long been an important centre of Jewish life in Germany. The Heingartners were personally acquainted with some of the city's most prominent Jewish families. The diary records the increasing intensity of Nazi persecution of the Jews. In March 1933, Heingartner was still sanguine about the prospects for the Jews under Nazi rule: "Up to now all attempts to deprive the Jews of their rights have failed in other countries and it is not likely that Hitler's efforts will be more successful".<sup>14</sup> The diary records the boycott of Jewish businesses on 1 April 1933, but also notes that many Germans (including Heingartner's cook) ignored it.

As early as April 1933, Heingartner noted that a "regular exodus" of German Jews was beginning.<sup>15</sup> US consulates in Germany came under conflicting pressures, balancing the limits imposed by restrictive immigration legislation and compassion for people seeking to escape intensifying persecution. In June 1933, Heingartner noted an instruction

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13 On the constraints on the German economy in the "Third Reich", and the persistently low standard of living of most Germans in this period, compared to the United States, see Adam Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction. The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy*, London, 2006, especially Ch.5.

14 Diary, 29 March 1933.

15 Diary, 26 April 1933.



from the Assistant Secretary of State Wilbur John Carr to be as lenient towards Jewish applicants for visas as was compatible with the law.<sup>16</sup> However, in their study of United States policy towards Jewish refugees from Nazism, Richard Breitman and Alan M. Kraut have argued that Carr's instructions were "carefully crafted" to "give an appearance of leniency while still holding visa applications to a strict interpretation of the [immigration] quota law and procedures for its enforcement", and these remained restrictive.<sup>17</sup> Berlin, Stuttgart and Hamburg were the only US consulates to issue immigration visas, but the Frankfurt consulate handled visitors' visas to the US and was occasionally asked for advice on individual applicants by the other consulates. Reading the diary with the benefit of hindsight, one cannot help wishing that Heingartner had been more eager to bend the rules to help Jewish would-be emigrants. However, the diary covers the period prior to the most overt Nazi violence towards Jews (the so-called *Reichskristallnacht* pogrom of November 1938), and Heingartner seems to have been keenly aware of the dilemma in which he found himself, bound to comply with regulations on the one hand, and subject to political and moral pressures to help the victims of Nazi persecution.<sup>18</sup> His diary shows the situation in which a conscientious public servant found himself, faced with a crisis that he could not fully grasp. The refugee crisis became acute in 1938 after the Nazi occupation of Austria in March and the "*Kristallnacht*" pogrom of November. In that year the urgency with which German Jews sought to emigrate and, in many cases, seek entry into the United States escalated dramatically, but unfortunately the diary stops at the end of 1937 and does not cover this later period.<sup>19</sup> Fortunately, Lily Heingartner's Viennese Jewish parents and her younger sister Mitzi (spelled Mizzi by Heingartner

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16 Diary, 27 June 1933.

17 Richard Breitman and Alan M. Kraut, *American Refugee Policy and European Jewry, 1933-1945*, Bloomington IN, 1987, p.35.

18 See, for example, diary for 6 April 1936. See also 30 December 1936, where Heingartner wrote: "In some quarters I have the reputation of being very pro-Jewish and handing out visas right and left, while a New York journal (The Spectator) recently attacked me for having strong national socialist sympathies and being hard towards Jews who apply for visas."

19 On United States policy towards Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany, see David S. Wyman, *Paper Walls. America and the Refugee Crisis, 1938-1941*, Amherst, 1968; Breitman and Kraut, *American Refugee Policy and European Jewry*.

in his diaries) were able to escape Austria in time in 1938, although their property, including a much-valued art collection, was seized by the Nazis, and they eventually found safe refuge in Washington DC, via a number of European cities and a sojourn in Montreal.

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1938

in an automobile body building plant which supplies bodies for the new Ford car. That tied up Ford's factories so they had to be closed down. The bankers, according to Ford, are trying to get control of his interests which he intends to prevent at any cost. That, at least, is the Ford version.

January 30

Hitler's designation as Reich Chancellor was broadcast while I was having lunch and everybody in our house was excited. Louise rushed to the kitchen to tell Anna and ~~she~~ told the Fraulein. Gladys was skating at the time. This news was not unexpected but I saw groups of men talking excitedly as I drove to the office and work was almost at a standstill in the consulate all afternoon. Every time a newsboy shouted "Extra-Ausgabe" Fritz rushed down to buy a copy and when he returned the clerks would stand around him to read the latest developments. Mr. Schoepe was a changed man. His gloom was gone and there was an air of supreme assurance about him. His fondest wish had at last been realized and millions of other Germans were rejoicing with him. He is sure that Hitler will start in with his reforms immediately and that if the left parties offer any resistance he will dissolve the Reichstag and rule as dictator. According to Mr. Schoepe the SA will be made a part of the Reichswehr and the communist party will be dissolved. The banks will only be allowed to charge two percent interest on loans, the incomes of high industrialists will be greatly curtailed and the former cabinet ministers will be deprived of their big

Original typescript page of the Heingartner diaries.

Heingartner was an assiduous diarist. Every night he would write an entry, initially on average just under a page long, but later nearly twice as much, nearly always in one continuous paragraph. Missed days are very rare. Initially, Heingartner composed the diaries in long-hand, then typed up the entries on his Underwood portable typewriter every week or so when he had the time, often making minor corrections as he did so. In the early years of the diary, during Heingartner's period in Lithuania, these revisions could occur several weeks after the initial handwritten entry, but in the subsequent years, judging by the diminishing number of handwritten corrections and of references to typing up earlier entries, Heingartner seems to have taken to typing as he went. Every six months, he would start a new "volume of the diary", re-numbering the pages from page one again. From September 10, 1926, to the end of December 1937, the diary consists of 5,459 typed, double-line-spaced A4 pages.<sup>20</sup>

Naturally, to fit the diaries within the covers of a single book, and to avoid the longueurs and repetitions inevitable in the daily record of an orderly existence, an edition has to be selective. I have therefore given priority to the entries, or parts of entries, that will be of most interest to historians of modern Germany. Much purely private or family-related material has been omitted, even though Heingartner's descriptions of his family life are often very charming. Enough private material is retained to make sense of the continuity of the autobiographical narrative of the diaries, and of course some of the experiences of Heingartner's children illuminate aspects of daily life in Germany at the time, and have therefore been included. Many of Heingartner's diary entries reflect on his newspaper reading on world events or what he has heard on the radio, sometimes reproducing verbatim items he has read in the press (including newspaper reports on events outside Germany, such as in Spain, Ethiopia or Manchuria). Priority has been given to events in Germany that Heingartner saw at first hand, or heard of from witnesses whom he knew or met, rather than taking up too much space with material about which any reader might learn more elsewhere, e.g. from

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20 The first two years (1926-1928) deal with the time in Lithuania. The original pages are in the possession of the Heingartner family. Dr Alexander Heingartner (the son of the diarist) kindly provided me with photocopies of some volumes and subsequently with digitally scanned copies of the complete diaries. It is Dr Heingartner's intention to deposit a full set of digital copies in the library of the Wesleyan University, Ohio.

the files of relevant newspapers. However, here, too, enough of Heingartner's responses to what he has read in the newspapers or heard on the radio news is left in to provide sufficient contextual narrative continuity. Rather than inserting editorial commentary on external events in each year's entries, I have allowed Heingartner to tell the story as much as possible. Omissions are marked by [...]. Editorial insertions (such as translations from German) are in square brackets. Obvious typographical errors have been corrected without being expressly noted, although a couple of Heingartner's regularly occurring usages, such as Frankfort for Frankfurt, and Hackenkreuz for *Hakenkreuz* (swastika) have been retained to keep some of the period flavor of the original. Otherwise, writing and punctuation have essentially been left unaltered. Heingartner's American-English spelling has also been retained.

Heingartner's diaries were written for himself and his family. Even if there is some evidence of revision and polishing in earlier entries, he does not seem to have written with publication in mind. Revisions were made close to the time of the events themselves, so there is no or minimal retrospective adjustment to allow for hindsight. In this respect, Heingartner's diaries differ from published editions of journals written by other American diplomats recounting their experiences in the "Third Reich", as they offer a greater degree of immediacy and authenticity than the latter.<sup>21</sup> There is also a plethora of published accounts of Nazi Germany by English-speaking (and other) visitors to Germany in the 1930s, which have been subjected to serious scholarly analysis.<sup>22</sup> Such accounts vary enormously in value, depending on a range of factors including the length of time the authors spent in Germany, their command of the language and knowledge of the culture, and opportunity to mingle freely with ordinary Germans as well as with officials or other foreigners. The combination of the length of time Heingartner spent in Germany, his fluency in the language and familiarity with German

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21 I thank an anonymous publisher's reader for pointing out this comparison, e.g. with the well-known diary of William E. Dodd, Jr., and Martha Dodd, *Ambassador Dodd's Diary 1933-1938*, London, 1941. See also William Russell, *Berlin Embassy*, London, 2003 (first published 1941).

22 See Angela Schwarz, *Die Reise ins Dritte Reich*, Göttingen, 1995. See also anthology by Oliver Lubrich, ed., *Reisen ins Reich 1933 bis 1945*, Frankfurt am Main, 2004 (now also available in English as *Travels in the Reich, 1933-1945: Foreign Authors Report from Germany*, Chicago, 2010).

society and culture, and his access to information through a variety of channels, all contribute to making his diaries an unusually informative source for the effects of the end of the Weimar Republic and the establishment of the Nazi dictatorship in a German city.

On New Year's Eve, 31 December 1937, while his family prepared its annual ritual of pouring molten lead into cold water to see if any meaning could be read into the shapes this produced, a somewhat melancholy Heingartner wrote:

I have decided to stop my diary for a while. So little happens in Germany now that the Hitler regime is so firmly established that there is hardly anything to write about. And besides my diary is already so voluminous after twelve years of steady writing that I doubt whether Gladys and Alex will ever have the courage to start reading it and it was for them that I kept this daily record of events.

On the first point, Heingartner was unfortunately mistaken. 1938 would turn out to be a frighteningly eventful year, with the *Anschluss* of Austria, the Munich crisis over the Sudetenland, and the so-called "*Reichskristallnacht*" pogrom which signalled a drastic escalation in the persecution of the Jews. Instead of stabilizing itself, the Nazi regime embarked on the road to war and genocide. Heingartner was also mistaken if he thought his children would never manage to read his voluminous twelve years' worth of diary manuscripts. They would still be taking an interest in them several decades later, even into the next century, and encouraging their publication, something Heingartner could hardly have imagined in that cold and dark German winter of 1937. Heingartner's posting in Frankfurt ended in 1939. He then spent three years in Regina, Saskatchewan, before retiring to Oberlin in his native Ohio in 1942, where he died on February 18, 1945.