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## First He Fled The Nazis, Then He Transformed Greenville

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**FIRST HE FLED  
THE NAZIS.  
THEN HE  
TRANSFORMED  
GREENVILLE.**

*Max Heller's spirit lives on in  
Greenville's famous streets and  
in the Furman students in the  
Heller Service Corps.*

BY KELLEY BRUSS

## THE COMEBACK



From left: Max Heller as a child in Austria, as the mayor of Greenville examining development plans, and with his wife, Trude.

**F**RANCIE HELLER ARRIVED hand-in-hand with her father for her first meeting as a Furman trustee.

It was 2006, and Max Heller had transitioned from trustee to trustee emeritus. He was stiff with the pain of pervasive arthritis. But nothing would keep him from sharing this moment with his daughter.

“He was so proud,” Francie Heller says. “He could barely move, but he wanted to be there with me.”

Max Heller, who died in 2011, served Furman and Greenville and the state of South Carolina for much of his adult life. And he was the reason his daughter was stepping into this leadership role.

“It was because of my father’s involvement and love of Furman,” she says.

Heller’s commitment to public and private service is commemorated in Furman’s Heller Service Corps. And he is remembered as one of Greenville’s most notable mayors, the man who made Main Street pedestrian-friendly and planted its iconic trees.

Heller “helped catapult the Greenville community into the modern era,” says **David Shi '73**, who served 17 years as Furman’s president. And his vision continues to play out today.

But long before any of that, Heller was a Jewish teenager whose country had just been annexed by Nazi Germany.

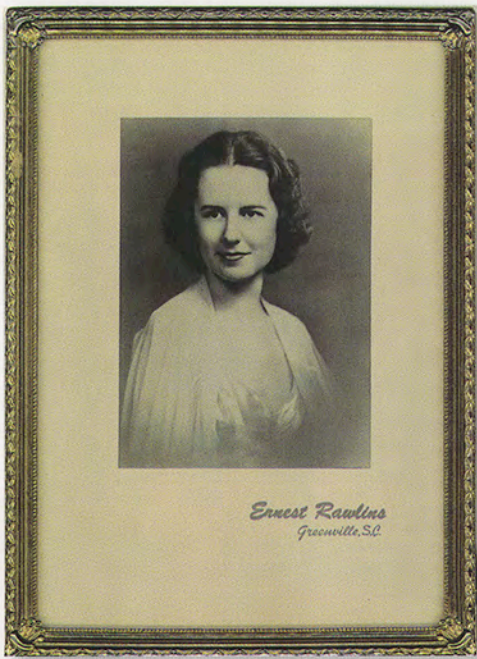
### A LETTER AND A LIFELINE

Heller, an Austrian, had a single connection to the United States — Mary Mills of Greenville. The two had met at a dance in 1937 when Mills and several friends were touring Europe.

A year later, with danger pressing, Heller told his family he planned to write to the American girl he had met. She was part of the Mills Mill family, and her father was well connected in the city’s textile world. Mary Mills then contacted the owner of Piedmont Shirt Company, who sponsored Heller’s escape and offered him a job.

Shortly after he began work as a floor sweeper, an announcement came over the

From left: Mary Mills' passport photo.  
The Hellers visit Tel Aviv.

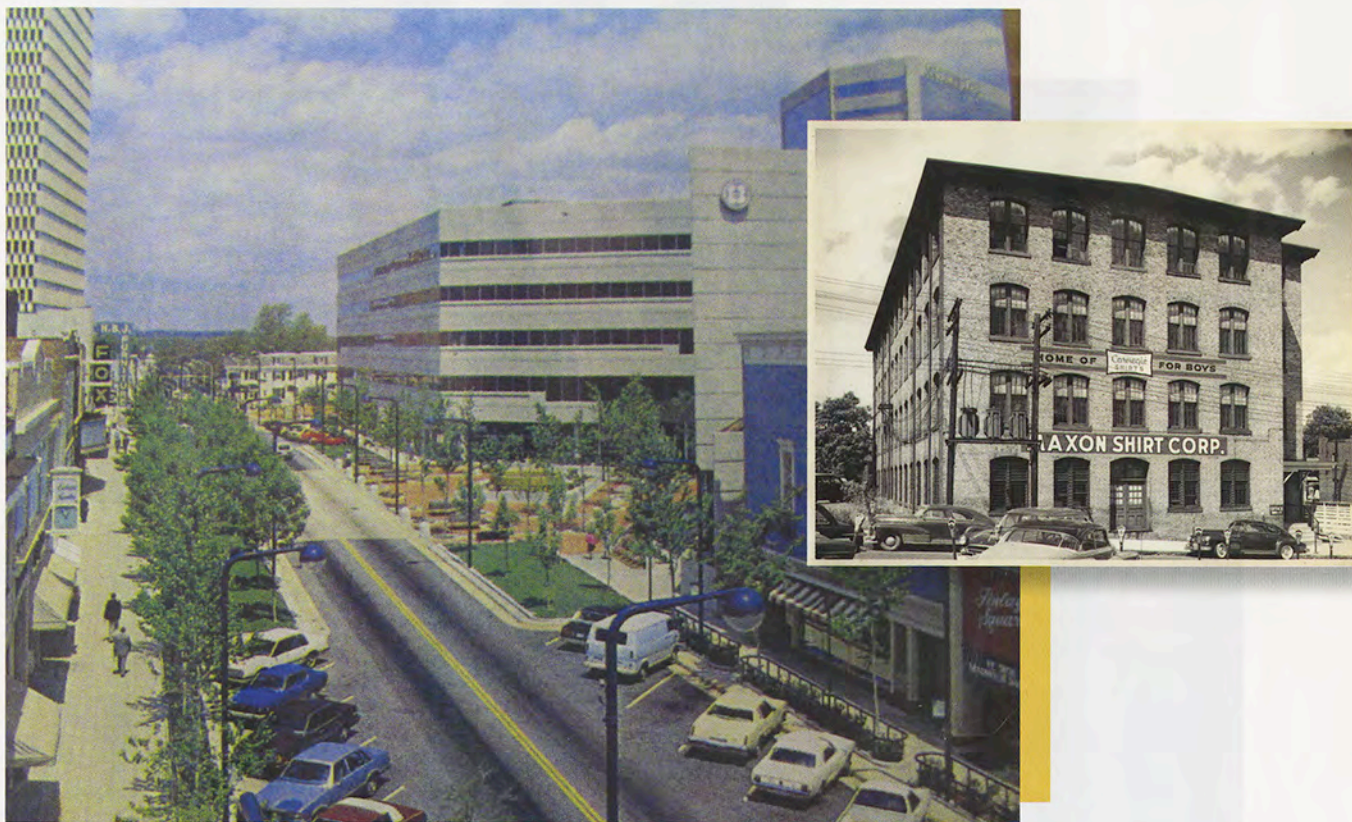


“Servant’s heart . . . Max and Trude,  
they’ve lived that to the fullest.”



Clockwise from left: Heller in 1945, when he was general manager of the Piedmont Shirt Company, Heller's swearing-in at Greenville City Hall, and the Hellers at a formal event.

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loudspeaker: “Max Heller, there is a judge to see you.”

Heller was worried it was an immigration issue. But Judge John Plyler, Furman’s seventh president, had come to meet the young man after reading his story in the newspaper.

“He was connected to Furman from that minute on, when the judge so warmly welcomed him,” Francie Heller says.

Another Austrian teen, Trude Schonthal, escaped to safety a year later. She and Heller had met in Austria before the war. He had told her then that he planned to marry her.

“I thought he was crazy,” Trude Heller says, laughing. They married in Greenville in 1942. Max Heller moved

up at Piedmont to foreman of a cutting room and then ascended to vice president. Ten years after arriving in the country, he opened his own business, Maxon Shirt Co., with fewer than 20 employees. By 1962, he employed 700.

But it wasn’t the legacy he had in mind for himself. Heller sold the company and was elected to the Greenville City Council. It was the beginning of the rest of his life in public service.

“This was Max ‘Help Others,’” says Nancy Cooper, who manages Furman’s Heller Service Corps.

### RENOVATING MAIN STREET

During Heller’s two terms as mayor, Greenville’s

downtown – like many across the country – was foundering. Commerce was moving outward into sprawling malls. No one wanted to linger in the vacant gloom.

Heller took the city’s limited traffic as an opportunity to act. He began work to narrow Main Street from four lanes to two, making sidewalks large enough for outdoor seating. And he planted trees.

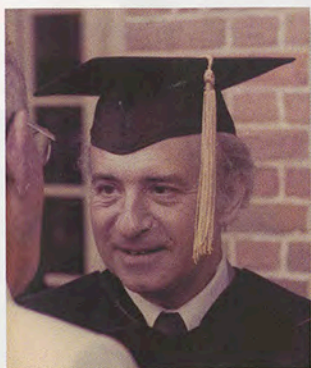
Detractors told him that people didn’t eat on the sidewalk in the South. His answer: “They do in Vienna.”

“Now look,” Cooper says. “That is the postcard of Greenville. ... They gave him a lot of grief but very quickly realized his vision was more than any of us could envision.”

Upper Main Street in Greenville in the spring or summer of 1982, looking north toward the newly built Hyatt Regency and present-day NOMA Square. The reduction of lanes from four to two was central to Heller’s vision.

Inset: Heller’s company, Maxon Shirt Corp., which he started in 1948.

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Clockwise from left:

Heller receives an honorary Doctor of Laws from Furman in 1975.

Heller and John E. Johns, Furman's president from 1976-94, pose with Furman cheerleaders.

The Hellers stand in front of Heller Terrace, located at the rear entrance to the Younts Conference Center.

Greenville's present mayor, Knox White, met Heller as a member of the former mayor's youth commission; White was a high school student then. He remembers being impressed by "just the fact that he was meeting with us and listening to our concerns.

"He had a wonderful ability to speak to people one-on-one and make people feel important," White says.

Shi says Heller's effectiveness in connecting was both personal and large scale. He was one of the first people Shi contacted when he became president in 1994 and wanted to strengthen Furman's ties beyond the boundaries of the campus.

The Hellers "were very visible members of the

Furman community," Shi says.

Trude Heller has sweet memories of attending basketball games together. "If I yelled, he promised to move away from me," she says, smiling.

The Hellers often spoke to campus groups about their escape from Hitler's regime as well as public life in Greenville, but Max Heller also liked to talk with individual students. His own education ended when he left high school to go to work; his wife's ended when Hitler decided Jewish teens would no longer be educated. Max Heller, who received an honorary doctorate from Furman in 1975, wanted more for others.

"He liked inquiring minds, people who were thinkers and wanted to learn," Francie Heller says.

**'THERE'S A DIFFERENCE. THIS IS A FURMAN STUDENT.'**

Both Hellers were deeply involved with the Collegiate Educational Service Corps. And their connections with the city helped open doors for Furman students.

Cooper says in the early days of the Service Corps, some business owners were hesitant about bringing a college student into the workplace.

"And he (Heller) would go, 'No, no, there's a difference. This is a Furman student. Furman!'" Cooper recalls.

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Members of Heller Service Corps pose with Trude Heller (center) and Heller Service Corps coordinator Nancy Cooper (end right) at a luncheon in May.

In 2002, friends of the Hellers raised \$1.5 million for the Service Corps' endowment. The Corps was renamed in honor of Max and Trude Heller. Now every student who comes to Furman looking for a way to serve is introduced to the spirit of the Hellers.

"Servant's heart," Cooper says. "Max and Trude, they've lived that to the fullest."

### 'MY FURMAN EXPERIENCE IS MY HELLER EXPERIENCE'

**Craig Yount '19** visited the Corps office as a first-year student and joined a group mentoring boys from low-income households. He recalled how one of the boys, whose single mother worked

three jobs, walked miles to a Furman student-mentor's apartment when he was in a desperate spot.

"When they don't have anyone to turn to, they turn to us," Yount says. "You get one little feeling like that and you're pulled in for the rest of the time."

Service has "become part of my identity as a Furman student," he says. "My Furman experience is my Heller experience; I can't pull the two apart."

Cooper says that's the spirit of the Hellers, alive and well in a new generation.

"This is the young version of what I'm telling you about Max," she says. "People helping people."

Trude Heller says this was always her husband's way. She remembers the early days of their marriage, saving spare change until she had enough to buy a new chair, one they truly needed. Her husband found the stash and asked about it, and she explained about the chair. He said charity could put it to better use.

"He always had in mind to do good things for people," Trude Heller says.

He was secretive about it, though. Francie Heller regularly hears new stories of how her father quietly helped a student or a friend.

"I wish I knew more about what he did for others," she says. "It was just who he was." ♦



**Craig Yount '19**, was a student director for Heller Service Corps and a Furman Fellow.