

Hans Gerhard (John) Stern

Hans Gerhard was the son of Artur Stern (forest-owner, born May 8, 1880 in Moravian Ostrava) and Stephanie (businesswoman). His mother was born on December 24, 1888 in Ptení. She was the daughter of Karl Jacob Mittler, a senior engineer (Bauoberkommissär) of the Austrian Railway Company.

Hans Gerhard spent a year in a children's home in Merano, Italy, when he was about seven, so he would not be affected by his parents' divorce. In addition to this, John also attended three different schools in two other countries before he reached university. Family records show he was enrolled at a private school in Mährisch-Ostrau, in 1919-20, a school in the Regierungasse 1 (nowadays Leopold-Figl-Gasse) in the first district of Vienna, in 1922-23; and at a high school or Bundesgymnasium in the 19th district of Vienna (Döbling) from 1922-23 until 1931.

He was then enrolled between the winter semester of 1931/32 and the summer semester of 1937 at the University of World Trade. Hans's father had lost his money by this time, and Hans told his daughter-in-law, Karen Brown, in 1992, that he was supported through university by his uncle, Dr. Leo Karl, "very unwillingly". At this university, he graduated with a diploma first; the diploma certificate was issued in July 1936.

Stern's graduation fell into the period of the 'Anschluss' of Austria: In the summer of 1937, he submitted his dissertation on *Die Grundlagen des Wettbewerbes und der Geschäftspolitik in der internationalen Spedition* [*The foundations of the competition and the business policy in the international forwarding industry*]. He submitted his First Viva on January 21, 1938, the second Viva on June 20, 1938.

Hans Gerhard Stern was one of very few Jewish doctoral students who were permitted by the Nazi regime to complete their doctorate after the invasion of the Wehrmacht in Austria. It had to be completed during the summer semester of 1938. So Stern was one of only seven Jewish doctoral students who were awarded a doctorate on July 12, 1938 at the 'World Trade'. According to an order of the Austrian Ministry of Internal and Cultural Affairs, which at that time was under the supervision of "Reichsstatthalter" Arthur Seyss-Inquart, the graduation of Jewish doctoral students was subject to a number of restrictions that were designed to remove any dignity from this academic event and give it its character of an administrative act:

- the graduation had to take place in camera;
- the candidates were not allowed to invite relatives or acquaintances to the doctorate;

- academic officials such as Rector and Promoter were required not to perform in the garb;
- instead of the usual oral vow, the Jewish PhD students had to take the pledge by signing a pre-printed form;
- speeches were not allowed.

Stern received a certificate with a swastika on it, and kept it all his life.

In 1938, Stern self-published part of the dissertation. Before this, on 5 July, he had handed over 50 copies of his doctoral thesis to the university. Either he did not request an exemption from the obligation to publish the thesis, or he was not granted permission.

At the beginning of August 1938, Stern was requested by the Property Transaction Office [Vermögensverkehrsstelle], which organized the systematic expropriation of the Jewish population in the 'Ostmark', to "offer" his securities to the Reichsbank Vienna.

At the end of October 1938, he gave up his apartment in Vormosergasse 5/2 (19th district of Vienna), where he had been registered since July 1935. At the new address (Schwarzspanierstraße 4, 9th district) he was "unknown" in November 1939, as the official information correctly reported.

In fact, Hans Stern had been able to leave Austria for the United Kingdom on 30 or 31 March 1939, having already been cleared and certified by the Viennese police headquarters at the end of July 1938 as “disadvantageous not marked”. This was in connection with a possible plan to emigrate to the USA. Obviously, he had paid all necessary compulsory levies to the National Socialist looting state. Stern told Karen Brown that March 31, 1939, was the last possible date for citizens with Czechoslovak citizenship to enter the UK without a visa – after National Socialist Germany had invaded Czechoslovakia in mid-March and established the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia (“Reichsprotektorat”) there.

From Prague, he took a train to Amsterdam. Unfortunately, the train was detained for two days and nights along the German-Dutch border. Finally, the Dutch authorities allowed it into the country, although a restrictive policy of foreclosure against Jewish refugees was in force. Women and children were allowed to continue on first, then married men, and finally unmarried men such as Hans.

In April 1939, therefore, Hans Gerhard Stern managed to escape to London. Of his closest relatives only his mother Stephanie who had been living with him in the Vormosergasse, had succeeded in escaping to Britain. She had arrived in London in

September 1938. Stephanie survived the Second World War and died in Wellington in 1968 aged 79.

Fatally for them, many other family members remained in Vienna, Czechoslovakia or neighbouring Poland and got caught in the clutches of the National Socialists following the establishment of the protectorate Bohemia and Moravia.

Among those who became victims of the Shoah was his father Artur. He was deported from Sillein / Žilina to the concentration camp of Auschwitz on 10 July 1942 together with his second wife Anna (born 10 August 1884).

Hans' grandmother Therese Mittler (born September 17, 1865 in Vienna), who had lived in Ferdinandstraße 31/17 (2nd district), was deported to Theresienstadt on July 28, 1942. On 21 September she was deported to the extermination camp Treblinka, where she was also murdered.

It's not known what became of his uncle Leo Karl (born 4 March 1882 in Orlau/Orlová), but he is known to have lost property to the Nazis and most likely did not survive either. Family members believe he was skiing when the Germans invaded Czechoslovakia and skied over the alps into Poland, also that he was last seen hailing a taxi in Katowice.

Documents also show Leo's wife Jana (born 14 January 1894 in Ostrau, maiden name Pick) was deported from Prague to Theresienstadt on 8 September 1942. From there, she was taken to Auschwitz on 6 September 1943 where she was killed.

From the maternal line, Hans Gerhard's uncle Josef Mittler (born 8 May 1890 in Vienna) and his son Siegfried (born 4 September 1925 in Vienna) also became victims of the Shoah: At an unknown date, both of them were deported from their apartment in Förstergasse 7/28 (2nd district) via Budapest to the concentration camp of Auschwitz. A list compiled by the Commander of the Security Police and SD in Prague, Dr. Erwin Weinmann, proves that all relatives of Hans Gerhard who were registered in the Protectorate had been deprived of all their properties.

Hans Gerhard could speak English when he arrived in the UK but did not intend to stay in that country. He had an affidavit that would have allowed him American citizenship, but he chose New Zealand instead and had an entry permit dated 25 August 1938. Interestingly, he received it not because of his university degree, but because of his experience in the wood industry: previously, he had administered forests and sawmills for his father in Ostrava and surrounding areas. The New Zealand entry permit noted that Hans Gerhard Stern was in good physical and mental condition, spoke English, German and French and brought no less than 200 pounds with him. He was required to pay a "landing fee" of 300 pounds but had successfully petitioned to have this reduced to 200 pounds.

On June 29, 1939, Stern reached his chosen country of exile, where he was most grateful to call his new home and where he lived until his death. In New Zealand he changed his first name to John in 1941.

Like many of the Jewish refugees from the German Reich, he settled in the capital Wellington. In 1947, he acquired New Zealand citizenship.

The academic degrees he had acquired at the Vienna University of World Trade were not recognized by the New Zealand authorities. Instead, the then University of New Zealand granted him a bachelor of commerce degree in October 1939. In January 1942, he qualified as an accountant after two years' extra study part time. John earned his living with a job at an accounting firm, an energy company, an egg factory and an export company. In 1948, he became independent as an accountant. Furthermore, he acquired a license for steel imports in 1955, which proved to be profitable.

In Wellington, John met Maureen Lindsay (born December 22, 1920 in London, died 1975 in Wellington). Maureen was a language teacher, who came from an Irish-English family. She became his wife on 21 December 1944 in Wellington. They had a daughter (Lindsay) and a son (Tim), born in 1949 and 1953 respectively.

John took also an active interest in politics and was a member of the New Zealand National Party. He occasionally offered economic advice to the then National government, in the 1960s, and corresponded with John Ross (Jack) Marshall who first acted as Deputy Prime Minister and, in 1972, up to the electoral victory of the Labour Party for some months as Prime Minister.

The past was always present, though. John told Karen Brown that his father, Artur, had bought a property at Arnsdorf (Wachau), on the River Danube, at the beginning of the First World War, when he had agreed to supply the Austrian Army with timber from its plantation. John had spent a happy childhood at Arnsdorf, which was later seized by the Nazis and then occupied by the Russians after the Second World War. After the war, John ended up with a one-third share to the family estate with similar sized shares going to a cousin and an aunt. John and his cousin were involved in legal action against their relative later, over the right to be able to sell their shares. They succeeded, but John told Karen Brown "it took years and years". The money was finally paid into an Austrian bank account, only to have the local Austrian tax department decide to seize it. Lawyers were involved again, and finally, at the beginning of the 1960s, John said that "in trickles, the money came out of Austria". Any tension in the family over the issue was happily resolved by 1969.

John's son Tim recalls that it was about this time -- in the 1960s -- that the family in Wellington was finally able to buy a car and pursue business opportunities that he could not manage before.

Tim Stern also reported in 2016 that his father was severely traumatized by the painful experiences he had had in Europe and especially in Vienna during the Nazi regime. It was significant that he never wanted to teach his children the German language or some other aspects of European culture. Instead, he brought with him into exile an enthusiasm for skiing and tennis. The stigma and discrimination he had suffered as a result of his Jewish descent led him to warn his son against enrolling one of his grandchildren in a Jewish kindergarten in Wellington in the mid 1990s in case she became stigmatised and a target as he had. According to Tim Stern, a certain mistrust of others also may have prevented his father from taking greater responsibilities in life; the staff of his accountant firm stayed rather small.

On November 10, 1999 Hans Gerhard alias John Stern died as the proud grandfather of four grandchildren (Stephanie, Lucinda, Hannah and Molly) at the age of 87 years.

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