

## **Hans Gerhard (John) Stern**

Hans was born in Czechoslovakia in 1912, the son of Artur Stern (forest-owner, born May 8, 1880 in Moravian Ostrava) and Stephanie (businesswoman, born on December 24, 1888 in Ptení. She was the daughter of Karl Jacob Mittler, a senior engineer (Bauoberkommissär) of the Austrian Railway Company, and Therese Mittler, nee Kohner.

### **School and university**

Hans 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, he also attended three different schools in two other countries before he reached university. Family records show he was enrolled at a private school in Ostrava, in 1919-20; a private primary school run by the school reformer Eugenie Schwarzwald in the Regierungsgasse 1 (nowadays Leopold-Figl-Gasse) in the first district of Vienna, in 1922-23; and at a high school or Bundesgymnasium in the 19<sup>th</sup> 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 Stern, "very unwillingly". At this university, he studied towards a diploma which was granted in July 1936. After this he enrolled in a doctorate, while also working full-time but unpaid for a local shipping agent.

Stern's graduation fell into the period of the 'Anschluss' of Austria: In the summer of 1937, he submitted his doctoral 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 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. It meant that 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 Reich Governor 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, giving it instead its character of an administrative act:

- the graduation had to take place in-camera, rather than publicly;
- 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 traditional garb for the ceremony;
- instead of the usual oral vow, the Jewish PhD students had to take the pledge by signing a pre-printed form;
- no speeches were 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 July 5, 1938 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.

## **Emigration**

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 (in the 19<sup>th</sup> district of Vienna), where he had been registered since July 1935. At the new address (Schwarzspanierstraße 4, 9<sup>th</sup> district) he was "unknown" in November 1939, as the official information correctly reported.

In fact, Hans Stern managed to leave Austria and his native Czechoslovakia for New Zealand via the Netherlands and the United Kingdom on March 30 or 31, 1939. The train he took late one night from Prague crossed the border from Germany into the Netherlands, at Oldenzaal on March 31, 1939. Unfortunately, the train was detained for two days and nights at the German-Dutch border. Finally, 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 Gerhard.

Prior to leaving Austria and Czechoslovakia, Stern had been cleared and certified by the Viennese police headquarters as "disadvantageous not marked". This was in connection with a possible plan to emigrate to the United States of America. Obviously, before leaving he had paid all necessary compulsory levies to the National Socialist state. March 31, 1939 was the last possible date for citizens with Czechoslovak citizenship to enter the United Kingdom without a visa – after National Socialist Germany had invaded Czechoslovakia in mid-March and established the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia ("Reichsprotectorat Böhmen und Mähren") there.

On April 4, 1939, Hans Gerhard Stern managed to escape to London. He could speak English reasonably well when he arrived in the UK but he did not intend to stay in that country. He had entered on the condition that he would stay no longer than three months and would not

take paid or unpaid work while there. He had also received an affidavit that would have allowed him to obtain American citizenship, but he had chosen New Zealand instead, a country that was part of the British Commonwealth of Nations. Hans' New Zealand entry permit was dated August 25, 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.

## **New Zealand**

On June 29, 1939, Stern reached his chosen country of exile, which 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. He also abandoned all use of Gerhard.

Like many of the Jewish refugees from the German Reich, he settled in the capital Wellington. Becoming accepted in New Zealand during World War II was difficult, however. Following the declarations of war by Britain and New Zealand on Germany, on September 3, 1939, John was classified as an alien. According to the *Alien Emergency Regulations* of 24 October 1940, he was assigned to the second lowest category (D). As such John was vetted and monitored repeatedly by police. His heavy German accent meant he was viewed with suspicion by some New Zealanders. In addition, the qualifications he had acquired at the Vienna University of World Trade were not recognized by the New Zealand authorities. Instead, further study was required, which he completed at night classes at the then University of New Zealand, achieving a Bachelor of Commerce degree in October 1939. In January 1942, he qualified as an accountant after two years' extra study part time. At this time, John earned his living working variously at an accounting firm, an energy company, an egg factory and an export company. However, he felt hamstrung in his inability to earn a decent wage until he was able to obtain membership of the New Zealand Institute of Chartered Accountants, which he finally achieved on February 12, 1948, almost a decade after arriving in New Zealand. It enabled him to become self-employed as a chartered accountant. Furthermore, he acquired a license for steel imports in 1955, which proved to be profitable. John was also required to wait until after the war to apply for New Zealand Citizenship, which he received in 1947, two years after the war's end.

John took an active interest in politics throughout his life in New Zealand. There is no evidence that he ever belonged to the New Zealand Labour party although he wrote several economic-related opinion pieces for a Labour-backed newspaper, *The Southern Cross*. Later he joined the New Zealand National Party, and often offered advice to the Prime Minister,

John (Jack) Marshall, who was elected in 1972 and who John knew personally because they were both members of the National Party.

In Wellington, John met Maureen Lindsay (born December 22, 1920 in London, died September 6, 1975 in Wellington). Maureen was a teacher, who came from an Irish-English family. They married on December 21, 1944 in Wellington. They had a daughter (Lindsay) and a son (Tim), born in 1949 and 1953 respectively.

Tim Stern reported in 2016 that his father was severely traumatised by the painful experiences he had had in Europe and especially in Vienna during the Nazi regime. It was significant, Tim believed, that John 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 been. According to Tim, 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 in a rest home in Karori, Wellington, as the proud grandfather of four grandchildren (Stephanie, Lucinda, Hannah and Molly) at the age of 87 years.

### **The fate of family members in the Shoah**

As noted above, he had managed to escape the Holocaust. The same applies to 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.

A number of other relatives, however, fell victim to National Socialist persecution. Fatally for them, they 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 Hans Gerhard's father Artur. He was deported from Sillein / Žilina to the concentration camp of Auschwitz on July 10, 1942 together with his second wife Anna (born August, 10 1884).

Hans Gerhard's grandmother Therese Mittler (born September 17, 1865 in Vienna), who had lived in Ferdinandstraße 31/17 (2<sup>nd</sup> district), was deported to Theresienstadt on July 28, 1942. On September 21 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 March 4, 1882 in Orlau/Orlová), but he is known to have lost property to the Nazis and almost certainly 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 Krákov. Documents also show Leo's wife Johanna (born January 14, 1894 in Ostrava, maiden name Pick, nickname Jana) was deported from Prague to Theresienstadt on September 8, 1942. From there, she was taken to Auschwitz on September 6, 1943 where she was murdered. 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.

From the maternal line, Hans Gerhard's uncle Josef Mittler (born May 8, 1890 in Vienna) and his son Siegfried (born September 4, 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 (2<sup>nd</sup> district of Vienna) via Budapest to the concentration camp of Auschwitz.

### **“Aryanization” and restitution of Castle Mitterarnsdorf**

Hans Gerhard himself and close relatives were also robbed by National Socialism. At its core, it was about the castle Mitterarnsdorf situated in the scenic Wachau region. Right after the end of the First World War, Hans Gerhard's father Artur had purchased the castle together with his aforementioned brother Leo Karl and their brother-in-law Sigmund Franz Welwart (November 12, 1884 to May 25, 1945). In May 1926, Hans Gerhard, who was still a minor at the time, was registered in the Land Register of Lower Austria as a co-owner of a one-sixth part of the castle and the surrounding estate. After the “Anschluss”, the four owners of the castle, all of whom were considered “Jewish” according to the Nuremberg Race Laws of 1935, were removed from the Land Register. Instead, the Reich Forest Administration (Reichsforstverwaltung) became the new owner of Mitterarnsdorf (Wladika 2010, chap. 3.1).

Only a few years after the Second World War, the rightful owners, who had survived the Holocaust, attempted to get the castle back. Thus, John and his uncle Sigmund Franz submitted applications for a restitution which was granted by the competent commission at the Vienna Regional Court for Civil Matters in February 1949. However, because the castle had belonged to a state authority during the Nazi era, there was a risk for years that Mitterarnsdorf would be claimed by the Soviet occupying power as so-called German Property for Austrian reparations payments (Wladika 2010, pp. 171-182). It was only after Austria became independent in 1955 and the occupying soldiers had left the country that the castle was returned to the surviving former owners. In the end, John, his cousin Maria Spenceley (nickname Mimi), Sigmund Franz Welwart's widow Eleonore (1887 to 1979) and Henriette Vogelsang (the daughter of Sigmund Franz and Eleonore Welwart, known in the family as Harry, 1914 to 1997), were registered as owners in the Land Register on October 29, 1958. Between 1961 and 1963, however, John and Maria Spenceley sold their respective parts to the entrepreneur Martina Hörbiger (September 2, 1902 to August 21, 1989), sister-in-law of the actor Paul Hörbiger (April 29, 1894 to March 5, 1981) who in turn sold the shares

to Eleonore Welwart and Henriette Vogelsang in 1966. Later, Eleonore (known as Lore), and Henriette (Harry) sold all the land that had been associated with their share in the estate, apart from the mansion itself and a small cherry orchard. These too were sold in the 1990s. So, after nearly seven decades, a period characterized by the economic instability of the First Austrian Republic, the robbery by the German Reich during the Nazi era, and the uncertainties of the post-war period, the Stern family no longer had any formal links with Mitterarnsdorf.

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*For internet links and sources see the German version.*