

REFUGEE  
Turned  
PATRIOT



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PATRIOT

One man's quest for security

KAREN M BROWN

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Front cover: *top*: The family estate at Arnsdorf, Austria, see chapter 15. *middle*: Hans Gerhard Stern, 1937. *bottom*: View of Willis Street, Wellington, photographed by an Evening Post staff photographer on 23 December 1938 [with overlay wash]. The Dominion Post Collection, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.

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*This book is dedicated to  
my husband, Tim Stern,  
my sister-in-law, Lindsay Offer,  
and John Stern's grandchildren:  
Stephanie and Lucinda Offer and  
Hannah and Molly Stern*

*"A Family Without The Understanding Of Their Past History,  
Foundation And Ethnicity Is Like A Tree Without Roots."*

*Source: [Jewishgen.org](http://Jewishgen.org)*



# Contents

	<b>Acknowledgements</b>	ix
	<b>Introduction: The Beginning</b>	xiii
CHAPTER 1	<b>Birth In Turbulent Times</b>	1
CHAPTER 2	<b>Where Is My Home? (<i>Kde domov muj?</i>)</b>	12
CHAPTER 3	<b>Take your degree and leave – Vienna 1938.</b>	27
CHAPTER 4	<b>Flight From Prague</b>	45
CHAPTER 5	<b>An Alien In Wellington</b>	57
CHAPTER 6	<b>The Red Cross Letters: A Fragile Link With Loved Ones</b>	69
CHAPTER 7	<b>The Camps</b>	81
CHAPTER 8	<b>Uncle Leo</b>	94
CHAPTER 9	<b>“A Racial Refugee”</b>	101
CHAPTER 10	<b>Accountancy Row</b>	115
CHAPTER 11	<b>A Love Match</b>	121

CHAPTER 12	<b>New Zealand Citizen</b>	130
CHAPTER 13	<b>Family And Friends</b>	139
CHAPTER 14	<b>Stephanie: An Early Feminist</b>	162
CHAPTER 15	<b>Arnsdorf</b>	169
CHAPTER 16	<b>Vienna Confronts Its Past</b>	181
CHAPTER 17	<b>Full Circle: Austrian Citizenship</b>	194



## Acknowledgements

This book began decades ago, sometime after 1992 when I had my second child, Molly. I had long been fascinated by my father-in-law's past in Europe and was excited when he agreed to be interviewed for the family. That account never seemed finished to me, and this is the result. Why did it take so long? All I can say is that I was busy, as a mother of two wonderful daughters – Hannah and Molly – and a working journalist, full-time for most of my career. As well, my husband Tim Stern and I have travelled often, for example taking the family to live in the United States for a year when the girls were still at primary school. In short, this book took a back seat until I was less busy, in the past year or two.

Throughout this time I have had phenomenal support. Tim backed me from day one and was the one who approached John on my behalf to see if he would agree to tell his life story – an escape from Nazi-occupied Europe. He agreed. I am eternally grateful to John for agreeing to share the harrowing events he lived through. I'm also extremely grateful to Tim for listening to me talk endlessly about this project for decades and remaining patient and encouraging regardless. He has read several different versions of the book over the years. He's probably as surprised as I am to see it finally finished.

I am indebted to a friend, Dave Bamford, whose own writing during Covid-19 inspired me to finally finish the book. One of Tim's colleagues at Victoria University, Associate Professor Simon Lamb, a successful scientist

and writer, has discussed the project at length and given invaluable tips. It was his idea to highlight key documents as the backbone of the narrative.

Hannah read all the early drafts and made pertinent and honest suggestions. She and Molly have been more supportive than I could ever have expected. During their busy lives they have listened, asked questions, read drafts and, in Molly's case, visited a special place in Vienna to take photos for me. One of my major motivations is that they would not see their mother fail. I am also deeply indebted to Tim's sister Lindsay Offer for her considerable help, and patience over decades. She not only shared an interest in the project but was interviewed, sent details, read drafts and replied to questions she'd answered already.

A chance connection with a senior archivist and author at the University of Vienna (Wirtschaftsuniversität Wien, or WU), Dr Johannes Koll, was also fortuitous. It led to much sharing of information in both our interests, and several meetings on campus at WU. His many qualities, including honesty and determination, are infectious and kept me going.

Brian Smith was the first person outside the family to read the full manuscript. As a former technical editor, he was tactful and dedicated to helping me improve it, at a time when I was both too close to the project and exhausted by it. Brian is also an accomplished photographer and used these skills to help me decide how to display the original documents that were kept by John and are the backbone of this story. He photographed many of the key documents professionally, making it possible for me to use some in the book.

Not least, Brian introduced me to Michael Ashdown, a professional translator, highly proficient in German, which was John's main language before coming to New Zealand.

Michael translated some exceedingly difficult-to-read letters that are a major part of this story. Actually, he did far more than translate documents from German into English; he did so in a way that brought alive the people whose words he was translating. I felt I was meeting those people, despite the fact that they had died long ago. Without his insightful translations, which he fitted in with his day job, I doubt this book would ever have seen the light

of day. As a result of his efforts, I began to understand key people – John’s father Arthur – even though I have never met him.

Stephanie Offer found the original Notgeld currency, a feature of the chapter on Arnsdorf.

I am also extremely grateful to a well-known manuscript editor, Anna Rogers, for reading my first version of the story and carefully describing what needed to be done to improve it, and why I needed to do that rather than balking at the task and walking away. My close friend, Suzanne Carty, a former editor of *The Evening Post*, where we met in the late 1970s, also ran her experienced editing eye over the manuscript during its final stages. Another friend, Margaret Galt, was the first person to encourage me to write this story, during conversations over coffee while we minded children together in the early 1990s.

I appreciate the generous assistance I’ve received from the New Zealand National Archives; Maureen Heath at the British Library; and both the manager of the Ostrava City Archives, Jozef Šerka, and the director, Dr Hana Šústková. Detailed information supplied by the Ostrava city authorities was pivotal in helping me understand Leo Stern’s fate. Fittingly, given the nature of this story about John, who used the tracing services of the International Red Cross during WWII, the New Zealand Red Cross also came to my assistance. At my request, its Restoring Family Links (RFL) Co-ordinator, Hamish Low, contacted the Red Cross in Russia and Ukraine, prior to the current war in Ukraine, to see if they held any relevant information. Nothing was found. I undertook not to quote from at least one of the responses, but the kind communication left me wondering how those people are now faring during the war in Ukraine. I wish them well.

I began this project out of curiosity but end it with a far better understanding and appreciation of people and events. I hope this modest book will also enrich the lives of John Stern’s family and descendants.



## Introduction: The Beginning

Hans Gerhart<sup>1</sup> Stern was on the last train that could get him out of Europe before a deadline after which the Nazis closed the exits and detained remaining Jews. Getting the required paperwork had taken time, persistence and luck. Now he had it. Late one night he crept out of the Prague home where the parents of a school friend had allowed him to stay, quietly so as not to alert neighbours to the Jewish couple, or himself, and lugged his suitcase to the train station in Prague, a city occupied by German troops. There he waited on the platform with other passengers also huddled quietly amid mayhem, leaving everything behind.

This was how Hans Stern's journey to safety and freedom began in March 1939. He made it to London and six weeks later New Zealand. The latter had granted him a Permit to Enter. While he was a Jewish refugee, which he acknowledged, he had applied for the permit and arrived under his own steam, totally independently with very little in his pocket.

Many Jews were denied entry to New Zealand, and Hans never knew why his application succeeded. Nothing came as easily afterwards; his academic qualifications from the Hochschule für Welthandel – the current-day Vienna

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1 Gerhart upon Naturalisation in New Zealand 1947. This is also the form used in some original documents pertaining to Hans. In our 1992 discussion he appears to have approved the use of Gerhart. My research for this book has made clear, however, that early in life he chose not to use his middle name.

University of Economics and Business (Wirtschaftsuniversität Wien) – went unrecognised and he was forced to take night classes at the then University of New Zealand, the forerunner of Victoria University of Wellington, to retain his educational qualifications and, therefore, his earning potential. Meantime he took whatever low-level accountancy-related work he could find. The days were long, because at most of these jobs he was if not ostracised then definitely an outsider. Any comment by him was analysed and viewed negatively. He was an object of suspicion and ridicule. Approached by police, his workmates reported that Stern was “not to be trusted”, that “his outlook is not British”, and that he had compared New Zealand unfavourably with continental countries.

His German accent – a result of his upbringing in a part of Czechoslovakia<sup>2</sup> where German was the main language – was unhelpful. He was classified a refugee, but was he, really? Or a German spy. Amid the doubt and scepticism, he came across as German in a country that didn't like people of German descent, a relic of World War One.<sup>3</sup> Government officials were just as confused, a view that was compounded by the fact that Stern came from a border area known as Silesia, a region of Central Europe lying mostly within Poland, with parts in the Czech Republic. The region has had a long association with Poles, Czechs and Germans, dating from the first half of the 10th Century.

But that was not the limit of the challenges facing Hans Stern in New Zealand. Even though he was allowed into the country, he was not permitted to prosper. He could not join the Society of Accountants until after World War Two, meaning he couldn't work at the level he was trained for and therefore was excluded from good accountancy jobs. Protectionism, in other words, which the Government recognised but declined to assist him with. He was

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2 When the Czecho-Slovak Republic was established in 1918 the country's name was spelled with a hyphen. However, in 1921 the Government renamed the country Czechoslovakia. Following the collapse of Communist rule in 1989, the Slovaks demanded that the hyphen be reinstated. On 1 January 1993, the country separated into two new states: The Czech Republic and Slovakia. Source: *The Guardian*, 30 March 1990.

3 See *The Penguin History of New Zealand*, by Michael King. Penguin Books 2003. P302.

also unable to become a naturalised New Zealander until after WWII. His pleas over these injustices feel on deaf ears, with the only excuse being the fact that it was wartime.

How do I know all this? Hans/John did not tell me. By the time I got around to interviewing him, he had well and truly moved on. I arrived at the truth courtesy of the New Zealand National Archives – a treasure trove of information that John himself probably never used or was even aware of. But, befittingly for an accountant, he was punctilious about documents. Being Jewish, he soon realised during the 1930s that he needed documents, if only to enable him to get out of Austria and Czechoslovakia as the Nazi noose tightened. Once he was accepted by New Zealand, the original documents were no longer useful to him, but he hung onto all important paperwork, and this has been invaluable to me, not to mention the next generation. And, as a journalist I love documents, especially ones that have once been secret, put away in files, but which are now available. The words of officials, for the Minister's ear only, or of a local landlord, policeman or fruiterer, for police vetting and surveillance of so-called "aliens", have been more than fascinating. It's best that John never lived to read some of the remarks, which are relayed publicly here for the first time.

John Stern lost most of his family to Nazi persecution. He spent much of his first six years in New Zealand struggling to make enough money to transfer some funds to Europe to help his father and step-mother in hiding, and to pay for food and safety. He kept the rest for his own board and food while putting aside whatever was left for expenses including the purchase of the war bonds expected of a loyal citizen. Throughout this period, until 1945, he worried about his father in German-controlled Slovakia, his mother in London during the Blitz, and his grandmother in German-occupied Prague. In time, Stern became a New Zealand patriot. When he could have returned to Europe, he rejected the notion. This is his story. That of an anonymous man who got on with the hand dealt to him, and made it work.

This story has only emerged because I met Tim, John's son. I was a daily reporter at *The Evening Post* (now *The Post*). After having two daughters, I asked Tim if he would see if John would talk about his background. I thought

it would be interesting to the next generation, when they were old enough, to know. I was reluctant to ask myself as it had been drilled into me by my parents – from London – that such questions could be upsetting to those who lived through WWII. (My stepfather was one who had nightmares following the war). To my surprise, John agreed, and a series of interviews followed. For the aforementioned reasons, I let him talk without interrupting. I recall being astonished at how willing and well prepared he was to talk. But I remained cautious. There were many things that I should have pressed him on but did not. In retrospect, his recall of people and events was remarkably accurate. So much so that I learnt during the writing process to consult my verbatim record our original interview whenever a question arose about a fact. In all but one instance, involving a placename, his comments were spot on.<sup>4</sup> He never sought publicity and I have thought hard about providing it now, but he trusted me, and here it is.

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4 The instance involved John's mention on one instance of Katowice, when I think he meant Krakow.

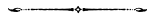


## CHAPTER 1

# Birth In Turbulent Times

Birth Certificate (Rodný list Geburtsschein)

As documents go, this one's had a hard life. It's the birth certificate of Hans Gerhard Stern, large at 25cm by 33cm. It was white but is now yellow. The top's in tatters, the result of the pins used to attach it to other papers. It's been handled often and travelled long distances. The paper's also separated into four along fold lines. The cellotape as reinforcement has obliterated some text, the stickiness having seeped through in the form of a brown cross. Large writing in Czech, in black ink, attests to the fact that Arthur Nathan Stern and his wife Stefanie had a son, Hans Gerhard Stern, on 13 August 1912. The birth was registered in Orlau [Orlová], near Ostrava. A red stamp with the words Kolek Korun and the Czech Republic (Ceskoslovenska Republika), 1919, was added later, when Ostrava was no longer part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Three purple water stamps also arrived later, one from a rather far off place: New Zealand



In much of the world, although not in New Zealand, Stern is a common name. In German it means star. The Sterns in this story came from Europe, although exactly where they originated is unclear. What is known is that our Stern family eventually settled in Ostrava, a rough, frontier-type town in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and that they raised a family there in the late 19th Century. They were Orthodox Jews and may have been lured to this relatively

201

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18 AUG 1944  
GOVERNMENT  
INSURANCE

# Rodný list - Geburtsschein



Jímž nížepsaný potvrzuje, že dle obsahu zdejší rodné matriky- vom Gefertigten wahrheitsgetreu bestätigt wird, daß nach Inhalt

der hierortigen Geburtsmatrik Band II, listu 390, čís. 1941  
svazku II, listu 390, čís. 1941  
Folio Nr.

se narodil panu Arthur Nathan Stern  
dem Herrn

přisl. do Ort od jeho manželky Stefanie  
zust. nach Ort von seiner Ehegattin

v M. Ostravě, Slezský čís. 1  
in Nr.

dne 13. listopadu 1912 (tisíc unáctě tisíc  
am (Eintausend

ein 13 jenž bylo dáno dne 20. listopadu 1912  
geboren wurde, welcher am

jméno Hans Gerhard Stern erhalten hat.  
den Namen

MOR. OSTRAVA, dne 31. března 1931  
MAHR.-OSTRAU, den



Správa israel. matriky.  
israelitisches Matrikenamt.

*H. Stern*