

Tomas Stern

Tomas Stern
Bratislava
Slovakia

My great-grandfather Adolf Stern was born on 28th February 1871 in Humenne, the son of Moric Stern [1840-1922] and Helena or Leni Stern, nee Gutman [1843-?]. He had five sisters and four brothers. Some of them died very young.

[Family background](#)

[Post-war](#)

[Glossary](#)

Family background

Humenne is a small city in Eastern Slovakia. At the end of the 19th century the Jews made up almost half of the city population. In 1930 there were still some 1,800 Jews. The Stern family moved to Humenne at the end of the 18th century [according to Humenne district records in 1778] from Vilnius [today Lithuania]. His name was Abraham Stern. He was a small merchant and the grandfather of Moric Stern. About Moric Stern - his Jewish name was Moses - I only know that he was the roshekol [head] of the local Jewish community for many years. Later his son Adolf Stern [1871-1934] moved to Opava. Opava is a city at the Czech-Polish border. They moved there either because of some work opportunity or because they had some family there. Then he lived for some time in Budapest and Vienna. In Budapest he studied at the Academy of Commerce and later he worked as the director of the Hungarian Trade and Lot Bank in Bratislava.

Moric Stern was the head of the Jewish Community in Humenne. The family strictly observed Jewish traditions. In spite of this, his son Adolf Stern studied in Vienna and became a progressive liberal. Along with Count Richard Coudehove-Kalergi, he participated in the founding of Paneurope and he was a member of its committee. Paneurope was the predecessor of the later EU. Its idea is and always has been a united Europe. Adolf was a member of the town commission for foreigners, a member of the Trade and Industry Chamber and the member of the Paneurope Committee, about which he held several lectures in Bratislava and in the country.

Adolf Stern got married in 1902, to Elizabeth Sternova, nee Willheim, who was born in 1873 and died in 1959 in Great Britain. She left Slovakia after the war. Her daughter Adriana Brodyova, nee Sternova, had left for Britain

with her husband earlier, in 1939. Her grandmother Antonia Bobretzky von Arvenau [1781-1862] came from a Jewish-Polish noble family. Antonia's sister Therese [1798-1886] married into the famous Jewish noble family of Guttman. She was the grandmother of Elisabeth Guttman [1875-1947], whose second husband was Prince Francis I of Liechtenstein [1853-1938]. It is well known that she lived openly as a Jew in Liechtenstein, as the widow of the late Prince even during World War II! One of her sisters, Rosalia, married Markis Robert Fitzjames a direct descendent of the English King Jacob II. Therese was a cousin of Elisabeth Willheim.

My great-grandparent's first-born son bled to death during his circumcision. Then a daughter, Adriana, whom I mentioned before, was born and the next son was Helmut Stern, my grandfather, born in 1906. My grandfather escaped circumcision due to his father's decision and fear. His father's decision saved his life during the Holocaust. He was captured with his family in Hlohovec by Slovak guards [1](#) in order to be deported. As soon as my grandfather proved that he wasn't circumcised and thus not Jewish, he was free.

In 1896 Adolf Stern wrote a book entitled Tozsde keletkezese es annak jelentosege [The creation of the stock market and its significance]. This was a book about the stock market and apart from that he was the author of many articles published in Hungarian, Slovak and German journals. He was interested in sociology, he was a specialist in water transport, and in 1933 he wrote a very interesting book entitled Loesung des Arbeitslosenproblems [Solution of the unemployment problem], which received a sympathetic response in the journals of Central Europe. He also had many lectures about his book broadcast on Bratislava Radio.

I would like to add that he regularly corresponded with several important personalities of the period, namely with Sigrid Undset [2](#), Nobel Prize winner in literature, and Gustav Stresemann, Chancellor of the Weimar Republic. Adolf died in Bratislava on 9th November 1934.

My grandfather, Helmut Stern, was born in Opava, when my great-grandfather was working there. My grandfather attended the Czechoslovak State Trade Academy in Bratislava from 1922-23. At least two thirds of the students were of Jewish origin. The only person still alive from his class is Mr. Marcel Kucera, who is about 90 now. After the war my grandfather worked as an accountant. Later, due to his illness, he had to retire. He died in 1995.

He married Johanna Brodyova, born in 1903. She was called Janka in the family. I have a very nice picture of them taken on a holiday in the Alps. My grandfather, who was deeply devoted to Janka, cut out a miniature portrait of her and stuck it to a portrait of my grandmother, just where her heart is. My grandmother comes from Hlohovec, Western Slovakia, and my

grandfather Helmut Stern was born in Opava, Moravia, but the whole family lived in Humenne, Eastern Slovakia.

My grandmother's family was one of the oldest families of Hlohovec. Hlohovec is a small town some 50 kilometers from Bratislava. Its Jewish community dates back to medieval times. Before the war some 1,000 Jews lived in Hlohovec. My great-grandmother, Sofia Brodyova, nee Quitt, was born in 1863 and died in 1923. Her husband was Jakob Brody [1861-1932], who, as far as I know, owned a pub in Hlohovec. Their children were Jenö, Katy, Bela, Viliam, Melania, Henrich, Ignac, Marcus and my grandmother Janka.

An interesting fact was that two Brody siblings, Janka Brodyova and Viliam Brody married two siblings of the Stern family in a mutual wedding. Viliam married Adriana and Janka married my grandfather Helmut.

From 1917-1918, Viliam Brody attended Pozsonyi felső kereskedelmi iskola [Academy of Commerce] in Bratislava. Most of the students were again of Jewish origin.

Adriana spoke eleven languages fluently. In 1939 she left with her husband for Great Britain (after my granduncle protected an old Jew beaten by members of the Hlinka guards - he was a handsome tall man), where she was a lecturer at university. Here she was a teacher at the secondary school on Grosslingova Street in Bratislava. Adriana's life dream was to go on a voyage on the river Rhine, and she did, and during this voyage she had a heart attack and died. Viliam Brody established a small firm for typing machines which later became a part of IBM. He died in Oxford in 1995. They didn't have children.

Ignac Brody worked as a lawyer and left for Great Britain. He was famous for his musical talent; he played the violin very well. He worked in the emergency health service as simple medical assistant.

Marcus or Marci Brody, my grandmother's brother, graduated in 1907 in Budapest and became a well-known lawyer in Bratislava. He is the only one in our family to be buried in a Catholic cemetery because he married a Catholic woman. He never converted and they had no children. He was the only one in our family to be buried in a Catholic cemetery, called St. Martin's cemetery in Bratislava, next to the Manderla grave.

The family traveled quite a bit. In 1921, they were on a holiday on the northern coast of Germany, and in August 1923, my grandfather and his friends were photographed in Karlsbad [3](#).

My father Juraj Stern was born during the war, in 1940, in Bratislava. Two years later his brother Andrej, or Bandy, was born in Humenne, where the family was hiding. He died on 16th August 1945 of an infection. During the

greater part of the war the family was hidden in Hlohovec by a Christian family.

In 1941 my grandfather, his wife and his mother left for Michalovce, where his family came from. My grandfather was living with false documents and a false birth certificate that were provided by a Greek catholic priest. His identity was disclosed soon, but he managed to escape and hide. He was hiding in a flat in which only a thin wall separated him from one of the high Nazi officers living next door. He had to live without moving around too much and during that time he was able to learn to play chess, solve various puzzles, and gain skills in high mathematics. After the war he was able to surprise a number of his colleagues by the depth of his knowledge that he gained during the six weeks of hiding.

There is another experience connected with Michalovce. My grandfather was captured by Hlinka guards, but he realized that if he wanted to survive he had to escape. He sent a message to my grandmother telling her how to get him out by pretending to be a Red Cross employee carrying food baskets. She was able to get in with a Red Cross crew and smuggle him out. Then they were hiding in Hlohovec, where my grandmother was born. She told me one story: when the family stayed in Hlohovec, she tried to go out to get some food. She met a classmate of hers, who looked at her with surprise and asked, 'How come you are still here?' This memory was very painful for my grandmother even after the war. My family spent the last weeks of the war in forests hiding in a potato pit.

In spite of the fact that my father was only four at that time, he vividly remembers a few dramatic situations from that time and until now he cannot suppress emotions connected with those moments. He also appreciated some Slovak farmers who were courageous enough to hide Jewish families. The one who provided shelter to them came back from the U.S. where he had worked in mines. There he developed a rather positive attitude towards Jewish people. He hid them in a small room and supplied them with food. During the raids of Hlinka guards and Nazi soldiers, he hid them in a deep potato pit and covered them with potatoes and wood. On one occasion, my father was separated from his parents and hidden in a stable crib for a week. He couldn't cry or shout but had to be absolutely quiet. He got something to eat and drink several times a day. This resulted in his nervous stutter, which he overcame only many years after the war.

Post-war

It happened so that none of my family was deported to a concentration camp. They either emigrated, or were hidden, or were able to escape under circumstances close to a miracle. When my grandparents came back to their house they were welcomed by the people, who had taken over their house,

with the disappointed question, 'You have returned?!'

My grandfather worked as an accountant with Pravda newspaper, but in the 1950s he was kicked out, accused of being a Zionist. My grandmother worked at home.

My father wasn't able to study at university because of his 'bourgeois family history'. He wanted to study archeology, but wasn't accepted during the 1950s. Then he finished a vocational typographic school and became a newspaper typesetter. Later, in the 1960s, the situation changed and he was allowed to study at the Faculty of Economics.

Almost thirty years later he became head of the Faculty of Economics, which has meanwhile become an independent university; the third biggest in Slovakia. He still teaches there and is still involved both in the economic and political life of the country.

My father married my mother Zuzana Sternova, nee Zimkova, born in 1947. She comes from an Orthodox Jewish family from Nitra, which was a big Jewish center before the war. Almost 10,000 Jews lived in the city and surroundings.

Glossary

1 Slovak guards

2 Undset, Sigrid (1882-1949)

Norwegian novelist, best known for her novels on life in Scandinavia in the Middle Ages. Her works of the modern era deal with social and psychological problems, and her conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1924 is reflected in her fiction as well as in studies such as 'Saga of Saints' (1934). She was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in 1928.

3 Karlsbad (Czech name

Karlovy Vary): The most famous Bohemian spa, named after Bohemian King Charles (Karel) IV, who allegedly found the springs during a hunting expedition in 1358. It was one of the most popular resorts among the royalty and aristocracy in Europe for centuries.