

## Fritz Stern (1926-2016)

Well respected in America and beyond, but a household name in Germany, not least because of his published conversations with Helmut Schmidt, Fritz Stern dedicated his life's work to the study of the cultural history – a blending of intellectual and political history – of modern Germany and Europe. “Why and how did the universal human potential for evil become an actuality in Germany?” was the “burning question” he sought to answer and the “fragility of freedom” was, as he put it, “the simplest and deepest lesson of [his] life.” Apart from studying history, Fritz Stern also made history, when he advised the British Prime Minister (Margaret Thatcher) on German reunification or the American Ambassador to reunified Germany (Richard Holbrook) shortly after this “fifth Germany” that Stern had known came about. Fritz Stern's insights into the workings of both liberalism and illiberalism were based on his profound historical case studies of politics and finance during the “long” 19<sup>th</sup> century that also encompassed little-known ideologues involved in preparing the soil for the rise of Nazism and its vicious anti-Semitism. Well aware that Germany's rise to preeminence on the world stage following the unification of 1871 was rooted in its scientific-technological culture, Fritz Stern created a portrait gallery of the key protagonists of that “age of genius:” Paul Ehrlich, Albert Einstein, Fritz Haber, Max Planck, Walter Rathenau, Chaim Weizmann. These portraits were drawn with a personal touch, enabled by Fritz Stern's family lineage.

Fritz Stern was born in Breslau into an assimilated, well-to-do and well-connected Jewish family. His paternal ancestors were physicians (already his great-grandfather was a doctor and his grandfather a professor at Breslau's medical school). Fritz Stern's father, Rudolf, spent over two years after his medical studies at Fritz Haber's Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Physical Chemistry and Electrochemistry in Berlin as a research assistant investigating colloids, in particular the human serum. This work became the basis for his *Habilitation* at the University of Breslau, which he received shortly before Fritz's birth on February 2, 1926. Fritz Stern's mother, Käthe (later Catherine) was a PhD physicist, who, however, switched fields and became an innovative educator in the Montessori tradition. Fritz Haber, whom Rudolf & Käthe Stern befriended during their Berlin sojourn, became Fritz Stern's godfather. The family bond was topped by the marriage of Rudolf's sister, Margarete, to the son of Fritz & Clara Haber, Hermann.

After the seizure of power by the Nazis, Käthe lost her job and in 1938, just weeks before the *Kristallnacht*, the Stern family fled from the escalating Nazi terror to New York. Upon settling in the New World, Rudolf Stern was able to practice medicine for twenty more years; Chaim Weizmann and Otto Stern, his cousin, were among his patients. Shortly before his death, he

drafted an invaluable character testimonial about Fritz Haber. Käthe's continued work as educator won much acclaim in America and beyond.

At the time of his emigration, Fritz Stern was attending the traditional *Gymnasium zu St. Maria Magdalena* in Breslau. In New York, he was admitted to Columbia University, where he received his BA in 1946. During a visit with his mother at Albert Einstein's house in Princeton in 1944, Stern confessed to being uncertain about his future career choice. There was little uncertainty in Einstein's reply, who advised Stern to study medicine ("Medicine is a science") rather than history. Stern would not heed Einstein's advice, major in history instead and enter Columbia's graduate school as a student of the cultural historians Jacque Barzun and Lionel Trilling. He graduated in 1953 with a PhD thesis on what he called "the politics of cultural despair" – a study in the rise of the Germanic ideology. Soon thereafter, Stern was appointed assistant professor, full professor in 1963 and Seth Low Professor in 1967 at Columbia. Apart from interruptions by guest appointments at Princeton's Institute for Advanced Study, the Freie Universität Berlin and the University of Konstanz, Stern remained at Columbia until his retirement in 1997. He died in New York of cancer on May 18, 2016.

Stern deeply resented slogans about the inevitability of the path "from Luther to Hitler" and such and countered them by pointing out that "German roads to perdition, including National Socialism, were neither accidental nor inevitable." And he added: "No country, no society, is shielded from the evils that the passivity of decent citizens can bring about. This is a German lesson of the twentieth century – for all of us." Thereby he generalized what Lise Meitner wrote in 1945: "It is tragic that even people like [Max von] Laue and Otto [Hahn] did not understand to what fate their passivity delivered their own country."

Fritz Stern kept an eye on the Fritz Haber Institute and took part in the celebrations of its 75<sup>th</sup> and 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary. In his talk at the latter occasion, he said: "In a way we are all successors to earlier tragedies, and we all have endlessly so much more to learn ... The scientist's ethical and civic responsibilities must be heeded, honored, and taught – to the benefit of science and mankind and as a tribute to a great man, to Onkel Fritz."

Perhaps we may add that while Fritz Haber was Fritz Stern's godfather, Fritz Stern is fondly remembered as a spiritual godfather of the Fritz Haber Institute.

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Photo: Georg Heyne, Fritz Haber Institute of the Max Planck Society, 2011.