

## **Henry Stern**

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At age five, most children are learning to ride a bike, starting kindergarten, or learning to tie their shoes. In today's society no child could comprehend religious persecution, seeing soldiers march in front of their house, selling all their worldly possessions, and moving to a foreign country where they spoke a different language. For Henry Stern, that's exactly what his young life was like. Growing up as a Jewish boy in Germany during the time of Adolf Hitler's rule, Henry's life wasn't easy; Jews in the country were being deported to concentration camps, ghettos, and other countries.

Henry's life changed drastically due to World War II and the Holocaust. He moved from Germany to America, faced confusion and challenges in a new country, lost many family members, and was recently reunited with his long lost cousin after 60 years.

Heinz Julius Stern was born in Warburg, Germany, on September 4, 1931. His parents, Arnold and Hedwig Stern, and his older sister, Hannalora Stern, couldn't have been happier that they had a new addition to the family. Heinz, along with his parents and sister, lived with his mother's parents in Westheim, Westfalen, Germany. It was a small town, with only a depot, a creamery, and a few shops. On one side of his house, there was a small store owned by his grandparents and on the other side were the bedrooms, kitchen, and living area. They also owned a farm where Heinz and his sister played. He and Hannalora didn't go outside much, but whenever they did, they wore the yellow Star of David pinned on their clothing. Heinz was never fazed by this; he simply thought everyone wore the yellow stars, which were meant to set the Jews apart from everyone else. His family was the only Jewish family in town. He lived a pleasant life for the most part. Almost 60 years later, when asked what his family's financial

status was as a child, he replied, “We were not wealthy people, but certainly not poor people, either, because we had a family.” (Spielberg, Steven : Survivors of the Shoah). Heinz remembers watching soldiers march in front of his house at only four years of age.

In 1935, Heinz’s great-aunt and great-uncle, Julius and Amelia Hagedorn, came to visit. They lived in a small town in the United States of America called Opelika, Alabama. Julius owned a department store in downtown and was a highly respected businessman. The Hagedorns tried desperately to persuade Henry’s mother and father to come to America. The Stern’s wouldn’t budge, so disheartened, the Hagedorns came back to America. In 1936, Julius sent six tickets for Heinz, his parents, his sister, his great uncle, and his grandmother to come to America. He, along with his sister, moved in with his father’s mother for six months and his parents had to dispose of all of their worldly possessions. It took about four to six months for all of their belongings to be sold and new goods to be bought. They were only allowed to bring ten dollars with them to America. His parents bought goods and had them shipped to America with the money they made from selling their things.

Henry and Hannalora learned about the tickets in June of 1937 when their parents came to get them from their grandmother’s house. On June 16, 1937, the six Sterns, who were to be traveling to America together, went to Hamburg, Germany, for a family farewell. Several of Heinz’s cousins, aunts, and uncles were there. They took a family photograph and said their goodbyes. Then they boarded the S.S. Washington, to young Heinz, “the biggest thing he’d ever seen,” and it set sail to America. At the young age of six, Heinz was having the time of his life on this massive vessel. He went for his very first swim on the Washington and spent most of the trip in the pool. He ran around the ship playing with his sister and the other children on board.

The S.S. Washington, with its 334 passengers, was the last ship of Jews to leave Germany legally.

On June 24, 1937, Heinz walked out on deck to find a crowd of people staring off into the distance. The Statue of Liberty was directly in front of them, and Heinz remembers it as “probably the most beautiful sight you’ve ever seen.” They docked at Ellis Island, New York, and most of the people got off the ship at this point. But Heinz’s family, along with a few others, remained on board until Julius Stern, who was sponsoring the family, met them in New York. When it was time to get off the ship, Heinz was nowhere to be found. The crew and his family searched the ship and found him swimming in the pool. He didn’t want to leave.

The family stayed in a hotel for three nights before boarding the New York Crescent Train to Opelika, Alabama, on June 26<sup>th</sup>. While on the train, Uncle Julius told Heinz and Hannalora their names had to be Americanized. That’s when Hannalora became Lora, and Heinz became Henry.

The family arrived in Opelika at 11:00 a.m. on June 27, 1937. When they got off the train at the Opelika Depot, Mayor John Crawsley presented the family with a proclamation welcoming them to the United States and to Opelika. The Sterns had a police escort to Julius and Amelia’s house on 401 Third Avenue. Everyone in Opelika was delighted that Henry and his family had gotten out of Germany and they lined the streets to see what these foreign people looked like. Everyone was cheering, clapping, and shouting things that the German-speaking family couldn’t understand. Henry’s family lived next door to his aunt and uncle’s house while a new house was being built for them just a block down the road.

Henry’s first week of living in the United States was extremely confusing and painful. He was completely shocked that he could go outside and play whenever he pleased. He didn’t have

to wear the Star of David, and he could play with other children. One day, only a few short days after he had arrived in the country, Henry saw a black man pushing a machine back and forth in a yard. He had never seen a machine like that before and went to investigate. The man pushed him away, which only heightened Henry's curiosity. Young Henry dove for the machine, and learned the hard way that it was a lawnmower when it cut off the top of his ring finger.

The merchandise his parents shipped to America arrived in boxcars, also known as lifts. Since they knew their ten dollars wouldn't last forever, Henry's parents sold all of the items to make money for things they needed in their new home. They bought furniture and other household items.

Henry and Lora made lots of friends, which was a new experience since they had never really played with other children before. It was difficult at first to play with other children, because Henry and Lora didn't speak any English. The first friends they made were Judson and Anna Salter, whose parents opened Alabama Office Supply Company in 1946. Ironically, AOS is now located in the former Hagedorn's Department Store.

Local school teacher, Louise Tollison, knew about the children and their family coming to Opelika several months before they arrived, so she brushed up on her German in an effort to help the children learn the English language. Lora learned quite a bit faster than Henry did, so she was able to start kindergarten at a public school. Henry took a little longer to learn and started kindergarten later than Lora. Henry and Lora went to Northside Intermediate School from first to sixth grade. It was easier for the children to learn than it was for Henry's mother, father, grandmother, and great uncle, but Ruth Meadows taught the adults who learned by using a Sears-Roebuck catalog. The Sterns would point to an item, and Mrs. Meadows would translate for them.

Henry remembered the day when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt visited the town of Opelika. He says, “It’s hard to visualize the most powerful man in the world, and a little Jewish boy who had just learned to speak English, twenty feet from each other.” Children lined the streets to see the President. Many shook his hand as he came by.

For the most part, Henry’s life was peaceful in Opelika. One night during the war, someone drew the Nazi symbol, the Swastika, with soap on the screen doors on the front porch. It frightened Henry and his family, but he didn’t think anyone would really hurt them, and the next day the screens were replaced. Things were also confusing. One day at school, there was a fire drill, and Henry and Lora had never heard of a fire drill before. All they knew was to get your things and get out if there were a fire. The two grabbed everything they had with them at school and went outside, only to be laughed at. The two had no idea it was only a drill.

Henry went to Henry G. Clift High School, also known as Opelika High School, from seventh to twelfth grade, where he played football and basketball for one year. He walked to and from school every day and was involved in the JROTC. He recalls disliking the uniforms they had to wear, but other than that, things were pretty normal for Henry during his teenage years; on Fridays they played football games and on Saturdays they went to the movies. His grandmother and great-uncle never learned to speak English, so German was always spoken at home, and people in the town would come over to their house just to listen to them speak to one another. The Stern family still held on to their Jewish beliefs and went to temple once a month in West Point, Georgia.

The war was still raging in Europe, things were getting tense, and Henry’s parents would sit around the radio and listen to the news from the war. There was a Prisoner of War camp in Opelika for German soldiers that housed about 20,000 prisoners, mostly young boys who had

been drafted into war. Henry and his friends would ride their bikes to the campsite to watch the prisoners work, and he would translate the workers' conversations for his friends. Very few prisoners tried to escape because they were treated so well and in many cases had better things than the citizens did. They could throw things away like milk and sugar, which were rationed to the people. There were three compounds in Opelika; one housed the S.S. troops, the "bad guys" who were not allowed to leave the camp. The other two compounds housed commonplace soldiers on work detail, and they could leave the camp to go do things like roadside cleanup. Camp Opelika, as it was called, was in operation for only three years, and the camp was demolished after the war. Since then, several prisoners have returned to see the site of the camp, but there is little left that shows any evidence that the camp ever existed.

Henry graduated from Opelika High School and attended Alabama Polytechnic Institute, now known as Auburn University, where he played one year of basketball. He then joined the Navy, where he served from 1951 to 1954. He met Rozlyn Brock at the Opelika Tennis Center and married her on June 23, 1961. The couple had two children, Virginia and Henry J. Stern, Jr.

Henry graduated from Auburn University in 1960 after his duty in the Navy and became a partner in Hollingsworth, Norman, and Stern Department Store in downtown Opelika. He tried his hand in real estate from 1971 to 1977, before going to work for the Opelika Chamber of Commerce where he stayed until he retired in 1988.

Henry, along with the other five members of his family, didn't know the whereabouts of the rest of their relatives since they had all stayed in Germany and had no way of contacting them. After the war, a college friend of Henry's went back to teach in Henry's hometown in Germany. Henry gave him his father's name and asked if he would try to find out what had happened to his family. His friend did the research for him and sent a book of Jews back to the

states. In the book, Henry discovered that his father's side of the family had been sent to concentration camps.

A close aunt, Mrs. Ida Hertz, and cousins Berthel Stern, Max Katz, Friedel Stern, and Siegfried Weinberg were all deported and killed in Auschwitz. Located in Poland along with six other concentrations camps, Auschwitz was the biggest and deadliest of all the camps of the Holocaust. It started out as a concentration camp, but as the mass killings became more popular, it turned into a death camp. Another cousin, Eric Weinberg, was deported to Riga concentration camp and, thankfully, he survived, but his aunt Erna Meyburg and his paternal grandparents were murdered by the Nazis. Many more of his family members were deported to ghettos, and most of them spent the remainder of their lives picking up the pieces of their past.

For 50 years, Henry Stern had been desperately searching for someone, anyone, who may still be alive from his family. He made hundreds and hundreds of phone calls and searched countless websites with some hope of finding a long, lost relative. Even after thousands of failures, Henry kept looking.

Then on November 21, 2004, Henry had trouble sleeping, so he got out of bed at around 4:30 a.m., made himself a cup of coffee, and sat down at the computer to check his e-mail. A friend had sent an e-mail regarding a new website she had found that tracks Holocaust victims and their families. Intrigued, Henry decided to check it out, and he typed in his grandmother's name. Amazingly, after all these years, something came up; a Fred Hertz from Durham, North Carolina. Henry grew excited and waited anxiously until 9:00 a.m. to call Fred. When he finally got in touch with Mr. Hertz, he explained to him who he was and told him how thousands of these type phone calls over the past fifty years had come up empty. But, something about this one just seemed different. Henry e-mailed Fred that family picture taken on June 16, 1937, the

day Henry's family departed for America. He asked Fred to look at the picture and see if he recognized anyone in it; trying not to get overly hopeful, Henry awaited Fred's response.

A few short hours later, the phone rang and it was Fred Hertz. Henry answered the phone quickly, with mixed emotions. After a quick greeting, Fred asked Henry if he was sitting down. When Henry responded to his question by saying yes and asking why, Fred said something that would send shivers down the spine and tears to the eyes of anyone who heard it, "Henry, I'm in that picture. I'm the boy in the back row."

Sigfried "Fritz" Hertz, or Fred, as he is now called, and Henry were cousins who hadn't seen each other in over 60 years. Both of the men said it was almost like talking to a ghost. Fred had heard that his entire family was dead, and Henry didn't really know anything about the rest of his family. Finding Fred Hertz was a miracle in Henry's eyes.

The two started exchanging e-mails constantly, and they talked on the phone every day, but for the first week, little was said; both men were still in shock over finding each other after all these years. They discussed lost family members, their journeys to America, and their own families. They had so much to discuss--sixty years of lost time. They sent documents back and forth: pictures, letters, family trees, and other things. It was fascinating to see what the other had come up with after all these years, and they made plans to meet face-to-face. Fred and his wife would host Henry, Lora, and Henry's two children at their house in Durham.

On January 24, 2005, with television cameras rolling, the two cousins joined in a tearful reunion in the driveway of the Hertz home in Durham, North Carolina. Hugs, kisses, and smiles were passed all around. The cousins were like kids again, joking and talking about all kinds of things, past and present. Over a span of three months, Henry and Fred experienced a miracle and

found a whole new family to love. To someone who has been through as much as Henry and his family have, family is key. If you don't have family, you don't have anything.

Henry Stern's whole life has been a roller coaster ride. He has been through things native-born Americans could never even imagine. At a young age, he came to a new country, overcame the hardships of learning a new language, making new friends, and starting a new life. He lost his family in what some would call the most heinous crime against humanity in all of history. He searched for decades, in hopes that he would someday find a trace of someone he once knew, and in the end, his efforts paid off. In an interview with Henry, who is one of the last known Holocaust survivors east of the Mississippi River, he said, "Nobody should feel that they are any different than anyone else. Just because I was born in Germany and I'm Jewish doesn't make me any different." If everyone could have Henry's mindset, the tragedy of the Holocaust would probably never have happened.