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Fritz Stern

Fritz Stern (1926–2016)

Well respected in America and beyond, but a household name in Germany, not least because of his published conversations with former Chancellor 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 the “fifth Germany” that Stern had known came about (unless otherwise noted, the quotes herein are taken from Fritz Stern's autobiography entitled *Five Germanys I have Known*). 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” 19th century that also encompassed little-known ideologues involved in preparing the soil for the rise of Nazism and its 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 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 and Käthe Stern befriended during their Berlin sojourn, became Fritz Stern's godfather. The family bond was reinforced by the marriage of Rudolf's sister,

Margarete, to the son of Fritz and 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, Rudolf's cousin, were among his patients. Shortly before his death, he drafted an invaluable character testimonial about Fritz Haber (“Fritz Haber: Personal Recollections”; see DOI: 10.1093/leobaek/8.1.70). Käthe's continued work as educator won much acclaim in America and beyond.

Prior to 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: “That's simple: medicine is a science, and history is not. Hence medicine.” Stern would not heed Einstein's advice, majored in history instead and entered Columbia's graduate school as a student of the cultural historians Jacques Barzun and Lionel Trilling. He graduated in 1953 with a PhD thesis on the rise of the Germanic ideology—of what he called the “politics of cultural despair.” 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 the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, the Freie Universität Berlin, and the Universität Konstanz, Stern remained at Columbia until his retirement in 1997. He died of cancer on May 18, 2016 in New York.

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.” In his book *Einstein's German World* he remarked: “No country, no society, is shielded from the evils that the passivity of decent citizens can bring about. This is the German lesson of the twentieth century—for all of us.” Thereby he expanded on a plea made by Lise Meitner in a letter to Otto Hahn from June 27, 1945: “I must say this to you, for so much [in Germany] depends on whether you will be able to understand what [your passivity] had allowed to happen.”

Fritz Stern kept an eye on the Fritz Haber Institute and took part in the celebrations of its 75th and 100th anniversaries. In his talk at the latter occasion (see *Angew. Chem. Int. Ed.* **2012**, *51*, 50),

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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International Edition: DOI: 10.1002/anie.201605519

German Edition: DOI: 10.1002/ange.201605519
