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# Hans Stern, the Founder of a World Jewel Empire, Dies in Brazil

Contributed by Newsroom  
Friday, 26 October 2007

Jeweler Hans Stern, the founder of an empire of beauty and sophistication, died today at age 85 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, the city he moved in, in 1939, when he was 17 fleeing Nazi Germany and never left. His multinational enterprise, the H. Stern 160-store chain, is present in 12 countries, including the United States (New York) and France (Paris).

Stern rarely gave interviews, opening an exception in 2003 to Brazzil Magazine's reporter Phillip Wagner. But he wouldn't allow that we took pictures.

Rio was his passion. Despite the increase of violence in the city he decided to stay. Stern was born blind in Essen, Germany. He told Isto É magazine in 2005: "I'm still blind of one eye nowadays. The other one I recuperated starting at age 2."

And about his start as a jeweler: "I started to work as a typist in a firm that cut and polished and imported stones and minerals. Later, I became a broker: garimpeiros (precious stones prospectors) gave me stones to sell in Rio and São Paulo."

It was in 1945 that he opened a little office to export Brazilian stones. But at the time nobody in the world seemed to care about Brazil's gems.

Opposing those who considered Brazil's stones of inferior quality he used to say: "There is no semiprecious stone, the same way there is no semipregnant woman or a semihonest person." In 1971, the GIA (Gemological Institute of America), would agree with him eliminating the semiprecious designation.

We reprint below "Brazil's Rock of Ages," a story on Hans Stern we published originally on April 2003 written by Phillip Wagner. The original piece can be found at [www.brazzil.com/pages/p123apr03.htm](http://www.brazzil.com/pages/p123apr03.htm):

The elderly gentleman behind the desk was wading through a large stack of correspondence when an assistant ushered me into the room. My passing broke the shafts of sunlight that penetrated the penthouse windows. Noting my arrival, the gentleman paused before briefly returning his attention to a document that I concluded he must have been deliberating on. I remember feeling a little awkward and embarrassed; I was surely imposing. But then he quickly laid the document to one side and welcomed me with such warmth and sincerity that I was caught off-guard.

"Would you like some coffee", he asked in a soft, but clearly audible, tone. I indicated that I would. I was about to experience Brazilian cafezinho for the first time. That was seven years ago, and I was immediately 'hooked'. I've never

since attended to the criticism of Brazil's coffee exports, which experts consistently label "mediocre" and/or "inferior". The quality of the harvest notwithstanding, I learned that preparation is the real key to a good cup of coffee. And I discovered that the gentleman behind the desk takes as much care with people as he does for the acclaimed products associated with his name.

I tried to apologize for arriving in blue jeans and a T-shirt, explaining that I had been en-route to my hotel when advised that I would only have this brief opportunity before interviewing music artist Marisa Monte. But the kindly old man gently waved off my concerns with a purposeful right hand and invited me to sit down with him. Although I enjoyed our 'interview', I was so impressed with the reception I received that my professionalism lapsed. I took notes but, in retrospect, asked few meaningful questions.

And even if I had, I wouldn't have worked them into a story at that time. The most important things I gained from that experience were an awareness that Hans Stern was as special as his success was remarkable, and a realization that everyone seemed to want something from him. The stack of correspondence before him consisted of requests for favors, for sponsorships, for donations, for ... well, you get the idea.

For me, the residual impact of that, almost chance, meeting was powerful. An ongoing kindness to periodically correspond over these years has heightened it. In these difficult times, when patriotism has become so fashionable in the United States, I am reminded of these words, inscribed on a memorial in my city of Indianapolis ... "The true patriot best supports his government by creating friendliness through kindness and generosity wherever fate may carry him".

Hans Stern is the only child of Kurt and Ilse Stern, and was born in Essen, Germany on October 1, 1922. It seems likely that the Sterns, or their predecessors, may have arrived in Essen in the preceding century since its population exploded from fewer than 5,000 in 1818 to about 120,000 shortly after 1900. Immigrants originated in Poland, Silesia and East & West Prussia. Most arrived looking for work in the Ruhr Valley mines that would fuel Germany's industrial revolution. Friedrich Krupp founded a cast steel factory in Essen in 1811.

Prussia was granted authority over Essen by the post-Napoleon Congress of Vienna, which was conducted by such notable 19th century diplomats as the manipulative Prince Metternich of Austria, the flamboyant Talleyrand of France and pragmatic Lord Castlereagh of England. The intrigue and machinations of the three, most particularly the Austrian Metternich were later emulated by Henry Kissinger in the form of his Middle East "shuttle diplomacy".

## War Times

The first decade of Hans' life was more or less carefree and happy, although he struggled through a slight physical handicap. Hans enjoyed a wide circle of friends, a number of which also survived the war; Hans has maintained intermittent contact with some of them over these many years. Hans' father was a "successful and well to do" self-employed electrical engineer in Essen, supplying installations in houses and apartments. But Hans' idyllic world began to disintegrate in the 1930s.

In early March of 1933 Essen exhibited a degree of independence that didn't sit well with the new National Socialist

Party, which failed to receive a majority of votes in the region's local elections. The Jewish population could hardly have orchestrated the result, since it accounted for only about 4,500 of the several hundred thousand, perhaps a half million or more people residing in or in close proximity to Essen at that time.

But Hermann Goering angrily advised Nazi followers that "You're allowed to settle up with the traitors, we stand to our words and it will be settled". The term "traitors" referred to Jews and other "undesirables". A book burning that took place in Gerling Square on June 21st presaged an untenable future for the Sterns in Essen, and life there became progressively more threatening for them. It seemed only a matter of time before everyone's worst fears would be realized.

Legislation referred to as "the Nuremberg Laws", which took effect in September of 1935, deprived German Jews of their citizenship by reclassifying them as "subjects of the state". On the nights of November 9 and 10, 1938, National Socialist 'brown shirts' terrorized Essen's close-knit Jewish community. Known as Reichskristallnacht, or the "Reich's night of broken glass", mobs of Nazi's and Nazi sympathizers went on a rampage. Jewish owned businesses and homes were destroyed.

One source indicates that "Shortly after Crystal Night, ... it was ... reported to Goering that 7,500 Jewish owned businesses (throughout Germany) were wrecked, 191 synagogues and 171 apartment houses were burned, and 36 German and Austrian Jews were killed". The interior of Essen's famed Steelerstrasse Synagogue, "considered one of the most beautiful in Germany", was gutted. Hans recalled that life had suddenly become "full of anxiety due to violent anti-Semitism and rumors of war".

In an ugly twist of purported justice, German authorities began to take Jewish males over the age of 15 into "protective custody" and relocate them to concentration camps. Hans, his father and a grandfather fled to Cologne ("Koeln" or "Köln" in German) by car. There they were secreted away by the librarian at the palace of the Archbishop of Cologne for three nights. It seems certain that their lives were spared by that act of kindness. The horrors of Kristallnacht, and their near brush with death, were taken by the Stern family as a clear sign that they should leave Germany at the earliest possible opportunity.

Shortly after returning from Cologne, Han's father began corresponding by letters and telegrams with an uncle, Alexander Kamp, who three years earlier had immigrated to the homeland of his Brazilian wife Gabrielle. Gabrielle was the sister of Roberto Burle Marx, the respected painter, sculptor, architect, poet and landscape artist whose reputation since that time has achieved legendary status.

Marx's global influence reaches as far as Malaysia, where the cultivation of rubber trees prematurely ended Brazil's rubber boom in the early 20th century. The Malaysian rubber stock had originated from seeds that British agents smuggled out of Brazil in 1876. But today, Malaysia is equated with the Petronis twin-towers which, post 9/11, have supplanted New York's World Trade Center as the world's most famous free standing skyscrapers. From the observation decks of these towers one can view the "beautiful mosaic of peaceful gardens" at Kuala Lumpur City Center Park that were designed by Burle Marx.

Hans' uncle managed to obtain immigration visas for the Sterns. Brazil, which eventually accepted 13,000 German Jews fleeing Nazi oppression, offered the only available refuge for Hans' family at that time; there were no other options. Ironically, the Ruhr Valley in which Essen is located was then renown as a "hotbed for typhoid fever, cholera, dysentery and malaria" each of which might have been more commonly equated with late 1930s Brazil than Germany. A curiosity,

at least for me, is that Karl Baedeker's first travel guidebook was published in Essen in 1829; I have relied on my 'Baedeker Brazil' guide since first traveling to Rio and São Paulo in 1995.

The prospect of uprooting and relocating initially further unsettled young Hans, but he was relieved to be escaping the horrors of persecution and his thoughts quickly turned to "expectations about 'exotic' Brazil". In February of 1939, the Sterns booked train passage to Hamburg, which had been established as a free port in 1888 and which had become one of the largest storage locations for two Brazilian imports, coffee and cocoa. There, with a dozen or two other Jews seeking refuge from the coming holocaust, they boarded a ship for Rio de Janeiro.

No Stern family member who remained in Germany survived; a grandfather committed suicide. Essen also fared poorly. Having been dubbed an "Armory of the Reich" as early as 1859, when it was still part of greater Prussia, it was targeted by 272 allied air raids in World War II. On a single night it suffered more than 2,000 casualties, almost 500 killed and more than 1,500 wounded, with 50,000 more residents left homeless. By the end of the war "ninety percent of the city center and sixty percent of the remainder" of Essen had been destroyed. Most Essen Jews who did not leave before the war, about 1,600, perished in concentration and/or extermination camps. Thirty years after the war Essen was home to about 170 Jews.

## New Home

The Brazil Hans first encountered was "much more civilized than (he had) anticipated. My uncle was waiting for us. We arrived in Rio on a ship called Cap Norte in the Brazilian summer, which is very similar to the German summer but the nights are longer. I really do not remember much about the sea voyage except that it was very rough and everybody onboard got sick.". Hans' family stayed only briefly with the Marx family in a house overlooking a huge garden. Young Hans favored the local food, mainly black beans and rice, and was immediately happy.

Hans and his father, Kurt, had to find work quickly. All of their belongings, save what little they'd been able to hide away and carry with them, had been confiscated in Germany. They were virtually penniless. Hans' father was hired to operate a power plant built by Engenharia in the city of Parnaíba in the northeastern state of Piauí. That was interrupted in the early 1940s when he was very briefly interned as a 'German enemy alien' on Brazil's entry into the war against the Axis powers.

Hans initially found work trading stamps in a philatelic shop. About a year after arriving in Brazil he secured a position, as a typist at Cristab, a family owned exporter of minerals and precious stones. He noted that "Like many working youngsters in Brazil at that time, I had taken an evening course in shorthand. But I had previously learned typing in Essen through my father's secretary. She visited us in Rio after the war". Hans was immediately captivated by the then modest variety of, and the products produced from, the rocks and gemstones that Cristab acquired.

At that time, "Cristab's main business was exporting quartz crystals for the U.S. war effort, as well as mica and gems". Hans recalled that when he left Cristab in 1943, it was still doing well. "But it was a family business depending on its sole owner, and it closed down some years later". At sixteen and seventeen, Hans supported his mother and himself through his father's internment on his own income. The two of them moved into a small apartment on a hill in Copacabana.

Hans 'picked up' Portuguese as he went along; his English was self-taught, mostly from reading Time magazine. The Stern family was reunited after three years when Kurt Stern accepted a position in Rio, at Servix, performing the kind of work he had done in Germany. Although the Stern family joined Rio's then very small German-Jewish synagogue, Hans' Jewish upbringing was very liberal, almost 'Reform'. "My father adjusted very well" to Brazil, he noted "but my mother never could speak Portuguese fluently".

Hans had already laid a strong foundation for future success, and had identified potential buyers, by the time he set out on his own. His enthusiasm and initiative at Cristab had earned him opportunities to travel and procure gemstones. And he had learned to cut and polish the stones. Some of the local jewelers at that time were selling items with faceted Brazilian gems as a sideline, but mostly only to the few visitors from abroad who came to Rio before and during the war.

The local public had not developed an appetite for these 'semi-precious' stones. Hans correctly guessed that, with the war ended, tourist traffic would increase. He realized that, using his knowledge of gem sources and local cutters, he could be successful wholesaling gems to the local jewelers. That became his initial focus as an independent young entrepreneur.

#### The Start of H. Stern

Hans formally established the company now known as H. Stern in late 1945, in a rented downtown office building, with \$200 he received from the sale of a beloved accordion. It was one of the few personal possessions he still had from Germany. "I was very fond of it and played reasonably well, mostly at social gatherings with my friends" he recalls. "I rented a small, one-room office with a desk, 2 chairs, and a telephone and hired a young girl to answer it during my absence". Hans personally procured his gemstones. "The closer you are to the sources" he notes, "the better prices you obtain".

Hans first focused mainly on aquamarine from Minas Gerais, tourmaline from Minas, topaz from Minas, citrine from Goiás and Rio Grande do Sul, and amethyst from Rio Grande do Sul, all for the purpose of being set into jewelry. But diamonds from Minas, Bahia, Pará and Mato Grosso, emeralds from Minas, Goiás and Bahia, opals from Piauí, corundum from Mato Grosso, and agates from Rio Grande do Sul were also procured, cut, polished and marketed by the vertically integrated H. Stern. According to the Rio Incomparable net-guide "H. Stern Jewelers (became) the only fully integrated jewelry concern, handling everything, from the mining of raw materials in the wilds of Brazil to the design and sale of its jewelry".

H. Stern today accounts for a majority of the Brazilian aquamarines, emeralds, topazes, amethyst and tourmalines produced and distributed around the world. But when the young immigrant first struck out on his own, none of these save emeralds were prized. It was Hans who first realized, and acted to capitalize on, the intrinsic value of these geological wonders. His innate ability to see that Brazil was poised to realize a natural windfall from mining, cutting, polishing, designing, mounting and marketing them was rooted in a childlike passion for exploration, discovery and revelation. His 'product vision' was complemented by marketplace savvy.

Hans could see that local jewelers, rooted in traditional paradigms, continued to think of tourist sales as a sideline business. "They failed to recognize the potential of promoting colored gemstones as something as typical of Brazil as coffee, oranges, samba and 'futebol'" he says. Hans understood that visitors wanting to return home with a small 'piece

of Brazil' represented a lucrative constituency for these untapped natural products. Seeing tourists disembark from their boats, he seized the opportunity to preempt established competitors, who were satisfied to remain in their shops waiting for business to literally "fall into their laps". The enterprising Hans sold gemstones right on the docks, erected waterfront kiosks and initiated the now commonplace practice of setting up hotel displays in the fashionable south beach zone districts of Leme, Copacabana, Ipanema and Leblon.

Hans' customer base grew steadily, mostly by word of mouth. "From the outset" he said, "I sold a good product at a fair price with an ironclad guarantee and superior after-sales service". It didn't hurt that Hans' self-education, as with gems and languages, extended to understanding people: Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* taught Hans how to judge and motivate them.

But Hans, characteristically, credits his employees for H. Stern's accomplishments. "Brazilians", he notes "are a wonderful source for the development of a competent and loyal work force". At age 80, Hans still presides over H. Stern. He still arrives at his office every morning, his sole concession being that he now arrives at 8.30 rather than 8 AM as he once did. He remains fully informed of ongoing activity and, remarkably, still participates in at least one annual field trip to 'show the flag'.

"Brazil always surprises us with new finds", says Hans. "If I were to list all the nearby little villages, I would fill a page with their names, and you would not find most of them on your maps". But he refrains from interfering too much. Hans' faith in the next generation, which has benefited immeasurably from his vision, strength and personal passion for excellence, seems nearly equal to the kindness and consideration he extends to everyone around him. Hans Stern is truly Brazil's 'Rock of Ages'.

Credits:

Historical data gathered from Essen - History at [http://www.eurotravelling.net/germany/essen/essen\\_history.htm](http://www.eurotravelling.net/germany/essen/essen_history.htm)

The Jews of Essen Germany at <http://www.edwardvictor.com/Essen.htm> and <http://www.edwardvictor.com/GermanyFrame2main.htm#kristallnacht> .

Special Note: 'Reform' is one of many variants of Judaism, and is generally considered to represent the most liberal variant in terms of the way adherents interpret and practice their faith.

Recommended reading:

The Congress of Vienna; A Study in Allied Unity; Author: Harold Nicolson.

The following information was found by the author online and is reprinted here in honor of Hans, the Jews of pre-WWII Essen, Germany, and those Jews who have emigrated to and enriched Brazil in so many ways:

The Memorial Book - A project by the Old Synagogue in Essen

Over 2500 Jews and around 1000 non-Jews from Essen - the politically and religiously oppressed, victims of "euthanasia", Sinti and Roma, the so-called "Outsiders", and homosexuals - were murdered under National Socialism. Their names are known. But only a few still remember the people behind the names. Reviving the memory of these people is what the Old Synagogue in Essen has set out to do with this Memorial Book Project.

The project targets the interested public, school classes and other groups, giving them the chance to personally study the life of one of Essen's oppressed and murdered victims of National Socialism. In taking on a sponsorship, the sponsor agrees to research the life of one of those murdered and to write a memorial biography. Traces of these people, and clues to their hopes, dreams, expectations and fears are found in the memories of their surviving friends and relatives, or in historical materials in the Old Synagogue's archive. The Old Synagogue aids in research, provides information to start with, and - if possible - contact with relatives. It supports and advises the sponsors in their work.

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Item of interest: Given that I'm from Indiana, I was fascinated to encounter the following quote at [http://www.cooljools.com/HOROSCOPES/gem\\_history.htm](http://www.cooljools.com/HOROSCOPES/gem_history.htm) while researching this story: "... did you know that substantial, 5 carat gem quality diamonds have been found in Indiana? The Young Diamond was found in Indiana glacial till in 1898, and the Stanley Diamond in 1900".

Phillip Wagner, the author, is a freelance photojournalist whose credits include coverage of the Israeli-PLO accords, film and music industry activity and travel. He's authored and co-authored many stories focusing on Brazil and maintains an extensive personal web site at <http://www.iei.net/~pwagner/brazilhome.htm>. The author welcomes correspondence from readers at [pwagner@iei.net](mailto:pwagner@iei.net)