

Chapter 3

My Uncle Otto Stern



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It was only since 1946 [1945] when my uncle moved to Berkeley that I got to know him well. Before this time we had never lived in the same town, and I had only seen him rarely. Otto Stern moved into a house he had bought several years earlier in the Berkeley hills not far from my parents' house. Because he was a bachelor, he hired a housekeeper who came in six days a week for a few hours to cook and keep house. He loved good food and good wine. The housekeeper for the last years did not keep the house as clean as he would have liked, but her cooking met with his approval, so she stayed for many years. On Sundays, he would have dinner with his sister, Berta (my mother) and family, or he would go into town for dinner in a restaurant and then to a movie. He loved movies, and Shirley MacLaine was one of his favorite actresses.

Mother was a good talker and he used to kid her that he was kind of deaf in his right ear, because she sat on that side at dinner when they were children. He could be quite talkative himself, especially if you got him to reminisce.

During World War I he was drafted into the German Army, made a weatherman and sent to a small town, Lomsha, in Russian Poland. There he used to go up in an airplane and make meteorological measurements. When the airplane crashed, luckily not hurting him, it was decided that he would just use balloons. He said that it was not very difficult to predict the weather; it was always terrible, very cold. Anyway, he had plenty of free time and used it to calculate a very large determinant which he always called the Lomsha determinant and he published a paper about it [1]. Another of his papers is also dated from Lomsha [2].

After World War II when one could travel again to Europe, he would go to Zurich every year and a half or two years and stay there for about six months. I think one of Zurich's attractions for him was the fact that he could talk German there, especially to the physicists at the ETH. He had had a classical education in the Gymnasium

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(high school) which included instruction in Latin and Greek, but no modern foreign language. He only learned English as an adult and never felt that comfortable speaking it. He had friends in Zurich, but I believe that there was also a sentimental reason why he went there. It probably brought back memories of his days with [Albert] Einstein and [Max] von Laue before World War I and the long walks and discussions they had. He developed a friendship with von Laue in Zurich which lasted a lifetime.

On those trips to Europe he used to take the train across the U.S. to New York, stopping in Chicago to visit with his friend [James] Franck. From New York he took a boat to Europe. He liked to take Dutch ships because their food was very good and he felt they were just the right size so one would not feel the vibrations so much.

On one of these early trips, he stopped in Copenhagen where he stayed with Niels Bohr. At the end of the visit he asked Mrs. Bohr where was the maid, because he wanted to give her a tip for the excellent service he had received. To his embarrassment he found out that it was Mrs. Bohr who had made up his room and that there was no maid.

On one of the later trips he was questioned by the customs officials for about 2 h. Why was he taking so many trips to Europe, why was he going to Amsterdam and so on and on. It turned out that they had been given a tip that a diamond smuggler by the name of Stern was coming back from Amsterdam and they suspected my uncle of being that person. After a time he was able to convince them that they had stopped the wrong man.

He took the train, because he felt the airplanes were not safe. He contended they lacked the instruments at that time to tell how far above the ground they were, and flying across the United States there were a lot of high mountains. My husband and I knew trains were on the way out when he began take airplanes in his last years.

His stops in New York always included a visit, both to his dentist and to his doctor there, Rudi Stern, who was a cousin. After Rudi's death in 1962 he had to find a doctor here in the Bay Area.

On the whole he seemed to be in rather good health, but he had arthritis in his hands which bothered him. One day he was trying to boil an egg. He had grandfather's—his fathers—gold pocket watch in his hand and dropped the watch into the water instead of the egg. I believe that this was the reason he bought the inexpensive "dollar" pocket watches. They seemed so out of character with his habit of having custom-made shirts, etc. After my mother's death in 1963 he came quite often to our house for dinner. He told me once, "Lilo, please don't use your good crystal glasses when I come to dinner, I might drop my glass."

After World War II he was entitled to a pension from Germany as a former professor. He refused to accept it, because he wanted no official connection with Germany. He had an unwritten rule not to go there, but broke it on two occasions [in fact, at least on eight, see Chap. 5] for which he made a lot of excuses. In the first instance, he went to East Berlin to visit his old friend Max Volmer. Volmer, as a sick, old man, had been released by the Russians to his old villa in East Berlin in the 1960s. Since it was difficult for Volmer to travel, my uncle went to him. The other occasion was a meeting arranged by the Nobel Foundation in Lindau at Lake



Fig. 1 Portrait of Albert Einstein by John Philipp with Einstein's signature. The inscription reads: Albert Einstein d'apres nature John Philipp 1929. Courtesy of Diana Templeton-Killen

Constance. It was about a year or two before his death. He used to say it was really a Nobel meeting and it was only a fluke that it happened to be in Germany.

One of the nicest things I inherited from my uncle is a portrait of Einstein, Fig. 1. It used to hang in his office in Hamburg. When the Nazis came into power in 1933, he was told one day that they were going to come the next day to take and destroy it. He took the picture home with him, and it was the only picture hanging in his study in Berkeley. He always looked up to Einstein, who was a role model for him.

His study was a spacious room (originally the living room) but full of books and papers. If one wished to sit down, it was first necessary to move several copies of *Physical Review* or the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* from one of the chairs. The dining room walls were lined with bookcases full of his old journals.

One reason he took an early retirement in 1946 [1945] was that he felt teaching took too much of his time; he wished to devote more time to some of his ideas. He wanted to derive a correlation between thermodynamics and quantum theory. His conviction was that the third law is fundamental, and that if it is postulated correctly, it should be possible to derive the wave mechanics as a consequence. He used to grumble that he did not have anybody to talk to about it in Berkeley. I think he did

not fare much better in Zurich. Anyway this project did not progress too well. He did publish one paper, his last [3], on this subject. Unfortunately he was not able to accomplish quite his goal.

References

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