Chapter 4

My Great Uncle

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When I was a child, my favorite relative without a doubt was my great uncle, Otto Stern, because he nearly always did exactly what he wanted, and he did very little else. Otto lived just 3 km away from us in a beautiful part of North Berkeley that is known for its fine views of San Francisco Bay, its pleasant prewar houses, and its many appealing gardens. I loved exploring Otto's backyard because he left it completely untended. It gave me the feeling of walking into a fairy tale, far removed from the everyday world of rules and order.

One day I asked him, "Uncle Otto, why do you let the garden grow wild?"

And he said to me in a completely matter-of-fact manner, "I don't like to garden, so I don't."

Many people claim not to care what other people think, but Otto was the only person I have ever known who seemed genuinely immune to such concerns. He cared deeply about the family, his friends, his sincere and trusted colleagues, but not about impressing the neighbors. He was very polite and unassuming, and he nearly always wore a three-piece suit, but otherwise he was wonderfully unconventional. If you want to understand how he became such a clever experimentalist, an innovative thinker, a *Querdenker*, I think it is tied to several things: he was quite possibly the most brilliant representative of a family that was and is full of smart people, he was affluent enough that money was rarely a major concern, he was highly independent with a natural curiosity, and he seldom followed the crowd. As far as I can tell, Otto never had a car, never learned to cook, avoided flying like the plague, and enjoyed life immensely. Also very telling, he never bragged about any of his accomplishments, not in the slightest. Showing off is certainly frowned upon in our family, and I was always taught that it is best to teach by example. Otto excelled at this.

Conversing with Otto, his wit and humor were immediately evident, and his intelligence shone through, yet he could also be rather humble with the occasional

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self-deprecating remark. But underlying all of this was a quiet confidence which left a lasting impression. He was very much his own man, unconcerned with current fashion in science or any other field. He had the experience of seeing himself become a rather famous scientist, and then become somewhat forgotten. I do not think it bothered him. He knew what he had accomplished was of lasting value. He had no need to be in the limelight. During his Berkeley years, he often visited the campus to see friends and colleagues, and for a long time, he attended the physics seminar. At the latter, he often sat quietly in the back rows, drawing little attention to himself. But his favorite person at Berkeley was his niece, my mother, Lilo, who was a physical chemist (as was my father, David). Lilo spent her entire adult life in science, the first woman in the family to ever do so. This was a daring choice for a woman born in Breslau in 1918. She was determined to have a life in chemistry, and it was made all the more feasible because she had the unwavering support and encouragement of Otto. The two of them always remained close, and I think they understood each other quite well.

But whereas Lilo and David's house was relatively orderly, light and airy, Otto's house felt completely different. The first thing one noticed was the pervasive odor of cigar smoke. He really did love to smoke them, often rather inexpensive ones, much to the chagrin of various members of the family. The interior tended to be fairly dark with lots of wooden furniture, most of it brought over from Europe. It was immediately obvious which room was the most important: the highly cluttered office, filled with books and papers everywhere. Otto always employed a housekeeper to clean and prepare meals for him. I always had the impression she was very good at her job, but it was clear she was not allowed to touch anything in the office, which remained perpetually messy, though the piles of paper made sense to Otto. At the center of it was the exquisitely crafted desk designed by Li (Elise Stern), Otto's younger sister. She was always Otto's favorite within the family, and probably his favorite person in the whole world. By all accounts, Li was a lively, free-spirited, highly independent woman who loved the arts, design, travel, fashion, and good conversation. During Otto's highly productive years in Hamburg, they lived just several blocks apart from each other in the Uhlenhorst district, then as now a rather chic neighborhood with attractive apartment buildings and small houses, lots of shops and restaurants, and a favorable location near the waters of the Außenalster.

In his later years, we often had Sunday lunch with Otto, usually at one of the nice restaurants with a view of San Francisco Bay, and always somewhere with attentive service and a certain air of elegance. His favorite of these was the Spinnaker, a locally famous eatery on the Sausalito waterfront which has a spectacular view of San Francisco and the water. In retrospect, I think Otto enjoyed it so much because it reminded him of happier days spent in Hamburg. If you want to savor the Otto Stern lifestyle for yourself, there is no better way than having lunch or dinner at the Jahreszeiten Grill Hamburg inside the Vier Jahreszeiten Hotel, still one of the finest addresses in that thriving city. The Art Deco interior, the superb cuisine, the extensive wine list, the well-heeled crowd, it has again recaptured much of its vibrancy and elegance from an earlier time. But to truly honor Otto, there is an even better way: reward one or more younger colleagues who have been working hard by treating them to a long, leisurely meal at a fine restaurant in your own part of the world. Take

them somewhere refined where they could not easily afford to dine on their own, and during the course of this pleasant indulgence, have a wide-ranging conversation in which you discuss many different subjects, not just science, and discover what they truly care about, exploring their hopes and aspirations for the future. This is what Otto would have done.

That highly productive period, late 1918 to early 1933, spent primarily in Frankfurt and Hamburg, was a golden age for Otto as a scientist, and I suspect that it also included the happiest years of his life. It was bookended by two much more difficult times. It is my understanding that Otto volunteered to serve Germany in the First World War. This would be completely plausible. It is not that he had any desire to wage war, far from it. Rather, Otto would have seen it as an obligation of citizenship, and many members of the family served in that devastating conflict. But what does one do with a young, promising scientist in wartime? The German command made him a weatherman along the Eastern Front. His main responsibility was to fly a biplane once a day near the front lines in order to take weather readings. This worked fine until one day the Russians shot down his plane. His rather flimsy biplane crashed into the ground. Amazingly, Otto was not seriously hurt, and he managed to rush back to safety without being taken prisoner, but it was a very traumatic experience which marked him for life.

In late 1968, shortly before my first flight, I asked Otto what flying was like. He looked at me and said, "The physics of flying is mostly well founded, though not always!" He said this in a cheerful tone with his characteristic smile. I can still see him in my mind's eye. He then explained to me his earlier experiences with biplanes which seemed absolutely incredible to me. I suspect his tremendous distaste for commercial air travel stemmed from those memories. Throughout the postwar years, he traveled to Europe nearly every year. Each journey started by taking the train to New York City where he would visit friends, see his doctor, and enjoy the city life before boarding one of the magnificent ocean liners of the day to travel to Europe in style. It really is a superior form of travel. Having done it myself in recent years, I highly recommend it. Otto really did know how to live well.

In those postwar years, Otto observed a general boycott of Germany. The crimes of the Nazi regime were unforgivable, and the sense of betrayal was profound and indelible. But he nonetheless visited Germany a number of times after the war, though each stay tended to be quite brief. Two of these episodes were related to me. The first of these, in the mid 1950s, was to the still war-ravaged and divided city of Berlin. He knew the city well, and his father, Oskar, stepmother, Paula, and younger sister, Li, among other relatives, had all lived in the stylish Charlottenburg district of Berlin for many years well before the war. While many members of our family made it safely to the United States or Britain in the 1930s, not all were so lucky. Paula Stern played a very important role in the family, principally raising Li, and always staying in close contact with Otto and his siblings. Based on her letters, I can tell you she had a bright and lively mind. Once she was widowed, she spent her later years living in Wiesbaden with her two sisters. All three of them would later starve to death at the Theresienstadt Concentration Camp, victims of the Holocaust. Otto was painfully aware of this and so many other tragic deaths. So why did he travel to Berlin in the 1950s? To visit Max Vollmer, his dear friend and colleague,

who had recently returned to East Berlin after being forced to work in the Soviet Union for many years. Vollmer was in declining health, and Otto wanted to see his old friend one last time. For Otto, friendship was more important than politics, and rightly so. It is my understanding that nearly all of his postwar visits to Germany focused on seeing specific friends and colleagues who remained important to him. Otto was a very loyal friend. The other trip to Germany that was often mentioned, in the mid 1960s, was a brief jaunt to Lindau on Lake Constance (Bodensee) for a Nobel-sponsored event. He made a point of telling Lilo, his niece, that he was only going because it was a Nobel event, not a German event. Otto wanted to make it clear that his overall boycott of Germany was still essentially in effect. After the conference, he immediately went back to Zurich.

Otto nearly always spent time in Zurich during those postwar annual trips because it allowed him the pleasure of being in a sophisticated German-speaking city without going to Germany or Austria. Although Otto spoke very good English and was grateful to be an American citizen, and wanted to be considered a U.S. scientist, culturally he always remained central European, and I suspect he was nearly always thinking in German. He was certainly most at home speaking his native tongue. But politically, he was thoroughly American, and that goes back to events in 1933.

In late March or early April 1933, Otto's older sister, Berta (my grandmother), was tipped off by a family friend who worked at Breslau City Hall: her name was on a confidential list compiled by the local Nazi authorities of persons to be arrested for political reasons. The friend advised her to leave Germany, the sooner the better. Let me assure you that any government that perceived my grandmother as a threat was a very bad regime. In April 1933, Berta, her husband, and her children left Germany, eventually living in the town of Versailles, France, for three years before emigrating to the United States. They had really wanted to live in either Austria or Switzerland, but both those countries refused to accept them. Otto would have been well aware of this difficult drama unfolding for his older sister in the spring of 1933. I therefore believe it is likely that Otto started considering his own departure from Hamburg as early as April 1933.

In any event, Otto understood early on that the Nazi regime now in control of Hamburg University and the nation would not make life easy for him, or for the rest of the family. In late spring, the new authorities refused to renew the positions for the majority of his laboratory staff for the coming year. In the summer of 1933, when he actively sought a position in America, he soon received a generous offer from the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh (now Carnegie-Mellon). He said he would happily accept, provided they also offered a job to his favorite assistant, Emmanuel Estermann, newly unemployed. They graciously agreed, saving Estermann and his family as well. With a new position secured, Otto resigned his post in Hamburg. He was not expelled from Hamburg, he quit. The distinction was important to Otto. He turned his back on the new Nazi administration of the University before it could formally dismiss him. To the degree it was possible, Otto left Germany on his own terms. Li left at the same time or soon after, embracing life in America.

While Li lived mainly in New York City, Otto lived in Pittsburgh, though they certainly visited each other on a regular basis. He was well supported by Carnegie, and he was very appreciative for this fine job, but he never warmed to the city of

Pittsburgh. Keep in mind, this was not the renovated Pittsburgh of today. In the 1930s and 1940s, Pittsburgh was a much grimmer place. Otto reported to the family that if he left a window open at his home, within several hours there would be a layer of soot on the sill from all of the steel mills of greater Pittsburgh. He was also underwhelmed by the cultural life of Depression-era Pittsburgh, and the local cuisine was found to be wanting. The hot summers were another unwanted surprise. And yet, professionally he did land in a good place, and I think it is fitting that he would become within ten years the first resident of Pittsburgh to ever be awarded the Nobel prize. The award ceremony took place in early 1944 in New York City, as the war was still raging. This was an ideal location, because it meant he could celebrate this triumph with Li and various friends in New York.

Tragically, Li would die the following year from medical problems, her life cut short at age 46. It was this painful loss which likely persuaded Otto to resign his position at Carnegie and relocate to Berkeley in 1945. He bought a house a short walk from his sister Berta and her husband Walter, and a short bus ride away from UC Berkeley. Berta and Walter would both predecease Otto. By the end of 1963, we were his closest surviving relatives.

Despite all the upheaval and misfortunes Otto witnessed, he never lost his wit or humor. I will leave you with one more example of it. One day he telephoned our house, and asked for my father: “David, I want to see you alone, can you come over?” This was an unusual request, as usually Otto so enjoyed speaking with Lilo, his “favorite niece” as he often called her. This was clearly true as she was his only niece.

“Yes, of course,” replied David, “I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

After sitting down on opposite sides of Otto’s magnificent desk, Otto said to him, “David, after careful thought, I have decided to make you the executor of my estate, because I trust you to do a good job, and I am not leaving you anything!” I guarantee you Otto said this with his ready smile, confident that David would understand the essence of the proposal. While it is true Otto left nothing specifically to David, he was quite generous to the rest of us, which was no surprise to anyone who knew him.

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