

Not born in the USA

Ruth Stern Gasten from Nieder-Ohmen, a Holocaust survivor, is standing up for human rights and democracy in her new homeland, California.

Born in the USA is the second and third generation. Ruth Stern Gasten has turned into a US-citizen. She loves Yosemite National Park, Latin American music, dill pickles and Middle Eastern foods. She enjoys her life with the ability of someone who has lost so much, but not the gift to be happy and to make others happy. Nothing is taken for granted. Being aware of this, Ruth Stern Gasten stands up for her country and for those who live in it, as different they might be. It is the diversity that fascinates her, the freedom that lies in the promise of unlimited possibilities. It's the opposite of what she experienced as a little girl. In the country in which she was born, there was no place any more for her and for her family. „My name is Ruth Gasten. I have the dubious distinction of entering the world scene the same year as Adolf Hitler. He became chancellor of Germany, and I was born in a tiny German village”, she starts her speech at the Rally for Love in Livermore, California.

“As a small child, I wandered from house to house, totally free. The front doors were open. I might help shell peas, sit next to the grandmother who was knitting and have her tell me a story.” Ruth Stern Gasten pauses for a moment. The woman, born in Nieder-Ohmen, has already given so many speeches in schools, in mosques, in churches, and now at the Rally for Love. In February 2017, hundreds gathered in Livermore in the Tri Valley to show they value a tolerant society out of solidarity with all who feel vulnerable. Ruth Stern Gasten stands right in the middle of the stage. Her red scarf and her red hat are glowing in the spring sun. Her friend, the artist Nova Starling, holds up a sign on which black, white, red and yellow hands stabilize another. And Ruth Stern Gasten, an 83 year old, with a heart-shaped face and smart, dark eyes, speaks about her childhood in Nazi-times.

“One day the doors were closed. My mother told me it was because I was Jewish, and Hitler had issued an edit: Christians were not to socialize with the Jews. I was confused and sad”, she goes on with her speech. “But not everyone was intimidated. Soon, the heavy winter snow started falling. One snowy evening we heard a knock on the door. Our neighbour Anna stood there with her sled. “Since the Nazis keep me from taking Ruthie sledding in the afternoon, let's go out now, when noone is watching!” This was in 1936. For the next two years the woman and the child went sledding in the moonlight in winter, till the Jewish family emigrated. Sledding with Anna is one of the few happy memories of Ruth Stern Gasten's childhood. “Like Anna we are not intimidated”, she says at the Rally for Love. “In the Tri Valley we aren't shutting our doors on vulnerable people. We are having a rally to say we honor diversity and value us all. I am happy to be a part of it.”

Ruth Stern Gasten has lived in the U.S. for almost eight decades now. Germany, her childhood, all this is far away, but time was unable to harm her memories. Ruth Stern Gasten was five years old when in January of 1939, she saw the Statue of Liberty in the New York City harbour for the first time in her life. The green lady with the long robe is about 60 at this time and already world famous. Every one of the seven prongs of her

Liberty symbolizes a continent, and she steps over broken chains, holding the torch high. "Liberty enlightens the world" was a present from the French people to the American people, designed by Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi, a Jewish-Alsatian artist who specialised in monumental statues.

Aboard the "S. S. Deutschland", a steamship of Hapag Lloyd, Ruth Stern Gasten left Germany, the country in which her life, the life of her relatives, of all the other Jews, but also of socialists, communists, social democrats, pacifists, Roma, Sinti, handicapped and homosexuals were in danger. „We escaped by the skin of our teeth”, says the survivor. She lost three aunts, two uncles, a great-aunt, and Jewish friends and acquaintances in the holocaust. And the feeling of being safe. As an eye-witness she speaks in schools about being a Jewish girl in the NS-time in the brown Upper Hesse and how hard it was to make a new start in a foreign country After the pogrom of 1938, her father was in Buchenwald for three weeks, until his wife Hanna got him out of the concentration camp. "He has never talked about how it was to be there", says his daughter. Joseph Stern was a man who read Goethe, Schiller, Heine und Fennimore Cooper. He fought in WWI, had been a prisoner of war of the Russians, captured in Bulgaria. He was taken to a camp where he discussed politics with the Russian guards. He was curious, interested in the world. "Die Gedanken sind frei" (thoughts are free), a song of the social revolutioneers of the 19th century, was one of his favoured songs. In the U.S., another song meant a lot to him: „Don't fence me in." Don't force me to live in a place where I am confined. In Chicago, Joseph Stern made a point of taking a seat beside black people in the bus, and he was happy when he saw other white people following his example.

„Interfaith Interconnect is the name of the interreligious groups that brings people from many different congregations together in Livermore and Pleasanton. Together with the Embracing Diversity Committee of Asbury United Methodist Church, they organized the Rally for Love to "promote and celebrate diversity in the Tri-Valley, honoring the human and civil rights of all persons, irrespective of age, race, religion, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, national origin, or economic status". Ruth Stern Gasten was one of the founders of the group in 2011. People were afraid of Muslims. Our organization helps people get to know each other", she explains. "and learn we're much more alike than different."

The Rally for Love means a lot to her because she knows only too well how it feels to be marginalized. "Since I survived the Holocaust, it's important to me to be involved in keeping the freedoms we have," she said to Beth Jensen (East Bay Times) who reports: "The current climate of distrust and fear resonated with her experience as a small child born during the rise of anti-Jewish edicts issued by the Nazis. „I related it to the way people acted toward Jews in the 1930s," she recalled." Ruth Stern Gasten says it in English. As a child, she spoke German, but she has forgotten most of it. She isn't able to write in German as she had to flee before she went to school. She already knew some of the letters and taught her doll on the busride to Chicago.

Anyway, she would not have been allowed to go to school. From November 1938 on, public schools expelled Jewish children. Ruth would have gone to the Jewish boarding school in Bad Nauheim as her older cousin, Karola Stern from Nieder-Ohmen, as Amanda Lamm from Homberg/Ohm, the siblings Addi und Herbert Sondheim from Ober Gleen, Ruth und Hermann Stern from Diez upon the Lahn und their cousin Arthur Weinberg from Lauterbach. And many, many more. Some of them have been reunited in the USA. Or in Auschwitz, as the sisters Hilda und Karola Stern, whose parents Meier and

Hedwig Stern had died of hunger in Lodz. Hilda Stern wrote poems and eyewitness reports after she was rescued. She took the manuscripts with her to the U.S. Her husband Werner Cohen has found them after her death and showed them to the Goethe Institute. „Words that burn within me“ is a rare piece of Holocaust literature. And there is more material about family Stern. Karola Stern Steinhardt has given video-interviews that are to be found on the Website of the United States Holocaust Memorial and Museum. On the pages Vor dem Holocaust und Alemannia Judaica, there are photos of family Stern. Also of Ruth Stern Gasten und her parents Joseph und Hanna Stern, nee Nussbaum.

Her grandmother Fannie Nussbaum and five of her uncles, the brothers of her mother, emigrated from Ulmbach to Africa. One of her uncles emigrated to Palestine. Fannie's sister-in-law, Dina Gardner, nee Nussbaum, who had gone long before to Chicago, guaranteed for the Stern family. By accident, Ruth became an American. „An Accidental American“ she has called her childhood memories. Had the embassy of another country given them visas, she might have a passport from Chile now. Or from South Africa. Israel. Peru. Cuba.

Even to have a visa was no guarantee to get out of Hitler's reach. Siegfried Frank, a farmhand, had left Hamburg four months after the Stern family on the „St. Louis“, another steamer of Hapag Lloyd, and didn't make it. The 32 year old from Nieder-Ohmen and the other 930 Jewish passengers wanted to emigrate to Havana or from there to the USA. They had visas, but their ship wasn't allowed to enter the Cuban harbour. An odyssey of several weeks began. Captain Gustav Schröder tried to take the refugees to Florida and was stopped by canon boats sent by the the United States authorities. He did not want to bring people who had been entrusted to him back to Hitler's Germany. He seeked and found four other countries who would take them. Siegfried Frank belonged to the 181 passengers who got asylum in the Netherlands. Two years after the Wehrmacht had invaded the country, he was deported from Westerbork to Auschwitz. On the 2nd of September 1942, two years before his 35th birthday, Siegfried Frank was murdered there. His name should belong on the manifest that was uploaded on January 27, 2017, on Twitter: A long list of names of passengers of the St. Louis is online, some with photos, and with variations the sentences: „My name is....The U.S. turned me away at the border in 1939. I was murdered in Auschwitz.“ My name is Siegfried Frank. The U.S. turned me away at the border in 1939. I was murdered in Auschwitz.

The last German men in uniform Ruth Stern Gasten saw as a child belonged to the crew of the „Deutschland“. One of the first American ones she remembers was the driver of the Greyhound bus who drove the newcomers from New York to Chicago to Aunt Dina and Cousin Irving. „We had the same experience as most of the immigrants today“, Ruth Stern Gasten once said in an interview. Her parents worked hard and had problems learning the new language. She was bullied by other children in school. They called her „Nazi“ because she was from Germany. This is what she tells youngsters when she speaks in school classes. „This kind of bullying did not stop with WWII. Children from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Iran have told me that the others in school call them terrorists. When you witness something like that, put an end to it. What these children feel is exactly what I felt when I was in this situation. You have to learn to say your opinion and to stand up for it. You are the next generation. If you don't say anything, evil can triumph.“

There are more and more dissenting voices to be heard. Sally Brown, a former teacher, who studied law after she retired, has written many lyrics for Purim (a playful Jewish holiday) songs. After the election of 2017 she wrote a new version of „Don't fence me in“: „Oh! We have land, lots of land under starry skies above which he'll fence in. And he'll change laws, lots of laws for the businesses he loves. 'Cause we elected him. We shall dwell by ourselves in our smog filled breezes. Listen to the murmur of our gasping wheezes. Drink polluted water filled with new diseases. ,Cause Trump did win! Who turned him loose? Is he addled? Are we saddled to his world wide enterprise? It's so obtuse. Let me wander as I ponder what my soul decries. I want to sing to the world as each day commences. Wake up everybody; let's not lose our senses. We won't be hobbled, and we don't need fences. Don't fence us in!“

The poet is about 88 years old. She went to the Purim Spiel at Congregation Beth Emek in March 2017 dressed as a Golden Girl. Ruth Stern Gasten dressed as an American reporter of the Forties. „She tucked two cards in the two sides of her Fedora hat. One said „Press“. The one on the other side read „Enemy of the People. „President Trump calls the Press the enemy of the people“, she explained to me, just to make sure it's understood.

Ruth Stern Gasten visited the village of her childhood twice already. The first time was in 1978 with her husband Burt Gasten and her daughters Felicia (14) und Amy (18), and with her book „Helping children to like themselves“ as one of her presents to the people of her town. In July 2008, she was in the Vogelsberg region with her partner Sam Stone and her grandchildren Katherine, then 16, and Robert, then 14. „Heinrich Reichel, the town historian and I had been in e-mail-contact“, she recalls. „He and his family were very kind to us and made us feel at home.“ At home where she had been once at home. The Stern family ancestral home is a farm house, one of the oldest in Nieder-Ohmen. 1558 is to be read in the oak timber above the door. Abraham Stern, Ruths great-grandfather bought the house in 1871 and gave the family its village name: Abraham's. The oldest grandson, Meier, was forced to sell the house in the Nazitime. He and his wife Hedwig lived for a while as tenants under their formerly own roof and then moved to Frankfurt. Together with their daughter Hilda, they were eventually deported to Lodz. The house Ruth had been born in was torn down in 2007. It had been sold before they had left. There had never been a plan to come back though her parents had been homesick. Ruth Stern Gasten remembers having heard the word Heimweh quite often. Even without understanding it, she kept it in mind. Heimweh, homesickness, is the word for a pain that doesn't go away and for a longing.

Since the mid-sixties, Ruth Stern Gasten has lived in California. She volunteered for the Democrats in election campaigns. About 50 years ago, the Student Education Loan Fund was started by a friend of hers. „He was an engineer at Sandia Corporation and a very civic minded person. He asked me to join the Board, which I did a few years after it started. The purpose of the Fund is to give students interest free loans to attend universities, trade colleges, any kind of education after high school“, she tells me. „When they are through with school and have a job, they pay the loan back slowly. Then it goes back to the fund, and another young person can get a loan.“

In March 2017, Ruth Stern Gasten gave speeches to two groups of eight grade students. „Funny thing was that both my speeches were somewhat different. In one speech I spoke about Hitler's desire to have Germany be an Aryan nation. In the second speech I didn't mention that at all. In the second speech I showed the group some of the things we brought from Germany. In the first speech I didn't show them. I guess making the speeches somewhat different keeps me from getting bored. In both of the speeches I mentioned that Hitler said ‚I will make Germany great again!‘ The kids all laughed because that's what Donald Trump said about the United States.“

Ruth Stern Gasten has not been born in the USA but she belongs to what's good in this country. Rep. Catherine Baker, a representative in the California State Legislature, spoke at the Rally for Love and met her there. „She asked me to be a part of the California State Legislature Annual Event when they honor Holocaust survivors“, Ruth Stern Gasten spreads the exciting news. „I will go to the State Capitol in Sacramento and be honored at a special session of the Legislature.“ The photo of the ceremony is now on facebook.

And Ruth Stern Gasten has proposed a program for people to tell their stories about how they or their families emigrated to the USA. „My idea is to do an event on immigrants. After all, everyone is an immigrant. Even the native Americans came across a land mass from Siberia to Alaska. I thought we could title it something like ‚Making My Way to the USA.‘“

Ruth also started a group of volunteer speakers for schools called „Eye-witnesses to History“. One of the speakers is World War II hero, another a man who was stranded in Europe during World War II because he was visiting in Yugoslavia with his mother when the war started, a woman who was a child in China's Cultural Revolution, a man who walked to Thailand from Cambodia as a seven year old boy, during the time of the Killing Fields. The students tell us „You're a lot better than a book“ when we come to their classrooms to speak about our lives.

Ruth Stern Gasten has told her own lifestory to the photographer Evvy Eisen for her travelling exhibition „Multiply by Six Million: Portraits and Stories of Holocaust Survivors“. Eisen has been working for 15 years on the 200 portraits of Holocaust survivors living in California and France. Every single one is standing for all six Million murdered people. And each person is unique.

This is what Ruth Stern Gasten realized long time ago, as Anna took her sledding and as an older boy, Alfred, helped her when she was bullied by other children. Whenever she goes into schools today, answers the questions of pupils and talks about a time that must not come back, she gives them something to think about: „Democracy is not a spectator sport!“ No matter where someone is born, which colour his or her skin has, it applies to anyone. Who has understood that once, plays on her team forever.

In Nieder-Ohmen, Ruth Stern Gasten is seen with respect and sympathy. With her book she returns, without leaving the U.S., to the spot on this world that had been the home of her family for 200 years. The additional photos turn the German edition into an Hessian-American family album, and with each turn of a page the certainty gets larger: Where a person is born is not important. It is decided by accident. To be at home inside

oneself and to open the doors for new friendships and experiences, this is what counts in life. Ruth Stern Gasten is a natural talent when it comes to this. A born cosmopolitan.

Monika Felsing

Bremen, Germany, in April 2017

Comment:

To translate this book has been a matter of honor and a real challenge for me. The German version remains true to the English one that had been written for young people in the USA and is another example of Holocaust literature, including a plea to all who would like to live in peace and freedom in future, to stand up for it here and now. There have been minor corrections of historical details, and some information is added that could be of special interest to German readers.

The German version of Ruth Stern Gasten's „An Accidental American“ has 176 pages and contains a lot of photos. The book, layouted by Wolfgang Rulfs, will be published this summer under the title „Zufällig Amerikanerin“ at BOD in Norderstedt, Germany. In Germany, it will cost 12 Euro. The book will also be available in GB, the U.S., Canada and other countries.

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