

# The Story Behind a Picture on the Wall

by Richard Stein

These photos show three generations of Steins. My father Eric is being held by his father Ludwig around 1930 in Austria. The oil painting commissioned in 1898 Berlin is of Ludwig's father. It hung in the family residence in Germany until it was brought to America by Ludwig's sister Hedwig. That is Hedwig's picture attached to the picture frame.



Hedwig was my paternal grandfather's sister (my great aunt). She was married in Berlin. Her husband was not only a prestigious judge; he was a high ranking officer in the German foreign service. In 1936 he was thrown out of his positions for the crime of being Jewish. They were the fortunate Jews. They faced anti-

semitism, but were able to emigrate to America with their possessions and bank accounts.

My father, Eric, was not so lucky, but later in life he counted his blessings. As a ten year old he dealt with some physical abuse, food shortages, and the daily strain of not getting killed, but avoided the concentration camps. As I understand it, Grandfather Ludwig stayed in the Vienna apartment and sent his son and wife to the 'safety' of the countryside. They were in Tulln, Austria during Kristallnacht. The brains of the operation to leave Austria was Dad's maternal grandfather, Julius Lieb Shapira.

Grandfather Julius owned the department store in the village. He was outfitting refugee German Jews with coats and boots and giving them an underground railroad type way station for years. He had the money, connections, and prestige to get those visas. He also had the time, as he suffered a heart attack on Kristallnacht. That meant he no longer had a business and couldn't do much physically. He was one of the unknown heroes of the St. Louis, part of the committee radioing the world desperate for help.

Eric last saw his father crying and waving a handkerchief at their departing train. Although he was a respected Iron Cross medal recipient of the German Army and a decorated veteran, the respect he was once given left when he was outed as a dirty Jew. He was only heard from once again.

The train took them to Hamburg, Germany from Vienna and they boarded the MS St. Louis to headed for Cuba. Cuba was the only country that gave them a visa. By the time they crossed the At-

lantic Ocean, Cuba changed its mind. After being forced to leave Havana harbor, they tried landing in the US, but these immigrants were not welcome. They headed back to Germany and probable death.

After six weeks on the ship trying to find a port that would have them, my family was amongst the lucky 25% who were allowed to disembark into wartime England. Julius was one of the unsung heroes, part of the committee aboard radioing the world desperate for help. They were considered illegal aliens for a year until they got sponsorship to emigrate to New York. Julius made it to America, bringing his wife, two of his four daughters, and my father, young Erich Stein.

As I was growing up, my father only gave us glimpses of being a child terrified pre- and more so post-Anschluss. He talked little of his first cruise, as he called it, on the ill fated St. Louis. He talked little of his time being an illegal alien in England except that he got all he could eat.

Eric settled in New York. His grandparents died within a few years and his mother only lived until Eric was sixteen. By now he was fluent in English and somehow graduated high school even though his education had been halted at age nine. He was the only Stein left. Or was he...?

Forward to the 1960s. Eric remembered a bit of his Berlin family mostly from pictures and stories. It is over 400 miles from Vienna to Berlin, a trip rarely made in the days before air flight. After a quarter century with no family he gets a call from Ludwig's broth-

er, Alfred. Alfred fled to South Africa and had no idea how to reach his nephew and only assumed Eric could be alive. No permanent cell phone numbers, facebook, or email addresses were available back then. Later, Alfred sent us pictures of young Eric and other family members. As a boy my father knew of a painting from family photos and was startled to hear his father had a sister. He never met nor remembered Hedwig.

When Alfred told my father on the expensive transoceanic call that his Aunt Hedwig lived in Forest Hills, I still remember my father all dressed up to drive from our house to meet his aunt. We had been living 45 minutes apart for a quarter century.

On the way out my mother cautioned my father. She implored him not to be so impulsive. I still hear her saying, "Eric, it is a scam." "They are after your money." "Don't fall for..." "Don't get your hopes up." "She is probably a daft old woman." She wanted him to slow down and check the story out. But my father, filled with adrenalin, was out the door in his nicest clothes.

Ringling her doorbell he was still not sure who or what he would find and was still figuring what to ask to authenticate the story. When the door swung open, there was a painting on the wall of his grandfather that he had only seen in family pictures decades before. He called us an hour later to let us know THE PAINTING hung in her apartment. Now it hangs on my wall.



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