

# OSNOS' LIST

*Letters from desperate Jewish family in Germany reveal 'big heart' of Detroit store owner*

By Laura Berman  
The Detroit News

**T**he file that Gilbert Osnos discovered among his deceased father's papers is almost an inch thick. The story that it tells could fill a novel.

For almost 70 years, the file had been locked in cabinets, moving with its owner, one of three Detroit brothers who owned Sam's Cut Rate Inc. After his father's death in 1989, Gilbert Osnos kept the file at his home in Stamford, Conn. Then one day, he opened it by chance and found a remarkably complete correspondence between his father and a German-Jewish family named Stark.

The Starks, from Munich, sought help from Osnos to sponsor their emigration from Germany to the United States.

who was 16 and a student in England when the correspondence began in 1937, and he tried politely — and then more urgently — to plead his family's case.

The first connection between Munich and Detroit was a slim one: A window dresser once employed by Stark's father, Hermann. The man emigrated to the United States in the mid-1930s, winding up in Detroit, Walter Stark remembers:

"On the day that this man left Munich, my father wished him good luck — his name was Albert Schmidt — and he said to him, 'Schmidt, you look like a *schlump*. Why don't you pick out a few suits, so you can make a good impression when you get to America?'"

Schmidt picked out a couple of suits, manufactured in Hermann Stark's factory, and never forgot the favor.

As the Nazi regime gained strength, Walter urged that the family leave Germany, a suggestion that his father at first dismissed. Two years later,

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**Walter Stark, right, was 18 years old when Herman Osnos was able to get his family out of Nazi Germany.**



The Detroit News



though, as the screws tightened, Hermann Stark recognized what he had at first resisted: His sons had no future in Germany. Suddenly, the slim connection with his former window-dresser became important. After Hermann Stark wrote to Schmidt, who was working in Detroit at Sam's Cut Rate, Schmidt passed the letter to the store owner whom he called Mr. Herman, suggesting that Osnos help his former employer by agreeing to sponsor Walter and his younger brother, Werner.

At the time, the immigration department required an affidavit from an American citizen willing to vouch for prospective immigrants and to offer financial support if necessary.

More than two years of correspondence followed, all of it preserved, including carbon copies of the letters Osnos sent to the Starks, copies of telegrams sent, photographs of Walter and his brother Werner, letters written in German and English.

Much of it was correspondence between young Walter Stark — who was mastering English and polishing his already well-developed Continental manners — and Osnos, the Detroit merchant. Stark had been studying in England since 1935, when as a Jew in Nazi Germany, he was barred from getting a high school diploma. Later, his family would be forced to sell their menswear manufacturing business and surrender their passports.

The letters tell a story at once dramatic and typical of the events of that time, as a prosperous German Jewish family who prided themselves on being true Germans awakened to reality: After 500 years of Starks in Germany, they needed to get out.

But they also tell the story of a Detroit man, a second-generation American Jew, who quietly befriended an entire family he didn't know.

Why did Osnos do it? His son Gilbert recalls him as "a very big-hearted person," who drew quiet satisfaction from his role in the Stark family's drama — a role that saved their lives.

In his father's files, Gilbert Osnos found many other letters from German Jews seeking affidavits. In one instance, he found a letter from the State Department refusing Osnos' offer to provide an affidavit for another German Jewish family, citing concerns about unemployment in 1932, the heart of the Depression. Osnos, who lives in Stamford, Conn., has donated the letters to the National Holocaust Museum and Memorial in Washington, D.C.; Walter Stark made copies of the letters available to The News.

Now 78, Walter Stark and his wife, Margaret, who also escaped Germany as a young girl, live in Huntington Woods. They both drive American-made convertibles, enjoy jazz, movies and their 10 grandchildren, and continue to work: He, as a chemical engineer, and she as a translator.

Only three weeks after Walter Stark left Germany, soldiers came to his parents' door to take him to a labor camp. Most of his family — grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins — perished during the Holocaust.

Nov. 16, 1936

From Hermann Stark to Herman Osnos, in German

Dear Mr. Herman:

My circumstances until now have meant that I could always provide for myself. Now the circumstances have become more than what people can bear. I don't ask for money today, dear Mr. Herman, but for a favor. I have two sons, who are 16 and 17 years old. Both of my boys want to emigrate to America. Unfortunately, I have no relatives in the United States and I have no connections there. For my sons, however, an affidavit is needed to make it possible for them to emigrate. Mr. Herman, you are an esteemed person, I am taking the liberty to ask whether you would be included to provide this affidavit for my two sons. My boys like to work, they are educated to be thrifty and good, and would in no way be a burden upon you.

In closing, I send a picture of the two children. I would appreciate a reply as soon as possible.

January 1937

From Walter Stark at Buxton College in England to Herman Osnos

Dear Sir:

I am here for the purpose of learning the English language. My masters are all very pleased with me and say that I most probably shall get through the exams.

You certainly can imagine how interested I am, whether you can manage this wonderful deed to bring me over to U.S.A. ... If you have anything I could do for you here in England, I am obviously ready to fulfill it.

Yours faithfully,

Walter M. Stark

A month later, Herman Osnos wrote Walter Stark, suggesting that "the matter will be much simplified if you have any relatives here." He also asked Walter to help identify information about smoking supplies, pipes and cigars for possible sale at his store. The letter, Walter Stark recalls, caused him anxiety: "We already knew our relatives would not help us, because they already had to bring over other, closer relatives." Writing with a fountain pen in his dormitory, Stark quickly responded.

Feb. 23, 1937

From Walter Stark to Herman Osnos.

Dear Sir:

As I received your letter of February 12 (just) now, I will answer it without delay. (He provides names of cigarette and tobacco manufacturers, as requested.) ... Coming now to your questions about my relatives in U.S.A., I know there are some of them, but they are not much related. Here is the address (of a second cousin, William Stark, of Boise, Idaho.) This man knows me by name, of course, but I do not know much about him; the only thing that I experienced is that he brought already many of his family over to U.S.A. ...

Yours faithfully,

Walter M. Stark

(In the meantime, Hermann Stark writes a similar letter to Osnos, suggesting that the cousin cannot provide

the needed affidavit because "he has already done so for too many relatives.") Two weeks later, Walter writes to Schmidt, concerned that he's heard nothing from Osnos and expressing the "hope that you can take care of mine and my brother's matter as soon as possible." He also wants to get information to Schmidt that will help him understand his urgent tone:

March 17, 1937

Dear Mr. Schmidt:

... Since you may be interested in how our shop is getting on, I can tell you that it is sold now, and as a sequel of it, my father has been deprived of his passport. The reason for it is not very difficult to guess.

For today, I think I have told you everything of importance. ...

Yours faithfully,

Walter M. Stark

March 23, 1937

From William Stark (in Boise) to Herman Osnos:

... I would be delighted to give the (Burgschaft) Guarantee for Walter Stark and his brother, were it not for the fact that I have already given as many of these guarantees as our government will accept from me. ...

On April 5, Walter Stark writes again to Schmidt because he has not heard from Osnos. "I would be extremely sorry to have displeased him in any way and I pray, will you, if ever possible, tell him that."

In May, Osnos writes to Hermann Stark in Munich and Walter Stark in England and asks for birthdate and other information for Werner and Walter, concluding: "You may rest assured that I am doing everything in my power to take (care) of this matter for you, and will bring your boys here just as soon as I can." The anxious letters from Europe and the reassuring response from Osnos in Detroit cross in the mail.

June 14, 1937

Memo to Herman Osnos

Dear Mr. Herman:



I put these two letters I received from England on your desk last night. You can see that fellow who is now in England is most anxious to get an answer from you. He has not heard anything from you for four months.

Yours,  
Albert Schmidt

**June 8, 1937**

*From Walter Stark, on vacation in Devonshire, to Herman Osnos*

Dear Mr. Osnos:

I have today received your last letter and it made me so joyful that I am feeling bound to reply immediately. ... This is one of the most wonderful spots I have ever seen. We have an excellent beach, a magnificent countryside, and as far as the eye can see azure blue sea. Oh, it is lovely. ... On the other hand, I am continuously thinking of you, and I am very, very eagerly waiting for the one word: "COME." Now just the sun breaks through a passing cloud and I am taking it for a good omen for my coming to you.

Yours faithfully,  
Walter

**July 15, 1937**

*From Walter Stark to Herman Osnos*

Dear Mr. Osnos:

I have finished my examinations 10 minutes ago and with this arises to me the all-important question. ... What's to be done now? And, of course, immediately I must think of you and your great kindness in doing so much for me. I am especially now, after the examinations have ended, extremely keen to get over to you as soon as possible. ... I am desirous to get to work.

I am hoping instantly to receive your reply soon, which will tell me that I may come to U.S.A. Until then, I remain

Yours faithfully,  
Walter

**July 24, 1937**

*From Herman Osnos to Walter Stark*

Dear Walter:

Just received your letter today and am very glad to hear you are all through with your examinations and just waiting for results. ... It won't be long before we have your smiling countenance here. ... Just as soon as I obtain any definite information regarding your entrance to USA, I will get in touch with you but I want to hear how you are getting along, so be sure and write me whenever you can.

Very truly yours,

Herman S. Osnos

*Instead, though, months passed without explanation for the delay. Walter Stark completes his English schooling and returns to Munich to await the affidavit. Although he continues to write, the family hears no word. Increasingly anxious, they contact the steamship lines that could take them to the United States. United States Lines writes Osnos, offering to help him fill out the affidavit form. Their Munich representative writes again to Osnos on Jan. 22, 1938 — more than a year since the Starks first made contact.*

The Starks, he says, "are rather discouraged and dejected. ... May I turn your attention to the fact that under today's circumstances, loss of time may be very disadvantageous and fatal for the Stark boys? ... The two Starks have finished their training. Walter as a practical chemist and Werner in the art of weaving and are ready and prepared for emigration. ... They are intelligent and well-bred boys and I am sure you would never regret having helped them."

**April 8, 1938**

*Telegram to Herman Osnos:*

OUR FUTURE DEPENDS NOW UPON YOUR FAVOR. PLEASE ANSWER ABOUT EARLIEST POSSIBILITY FOR AFFIDAVIT. STARK.

**May 20, 1938**

*Telegram to Herman Osnos*

WAITING DESPARATELY (sic). PLEASE REPLY WHEN AFFIDAVITS TO BE EXPECTED. STARK

**June 11, 1938**

*Telegram to Herman Osnos*

DOCUMENTS ARRIVED SAFELY. THOUSAND THANKS. STARK

Many details remained, and several more letters were exchanged before Walter and Werner Stark finally sailed for New York from Cherbourg, France, on Sept. 14, 1938.

While their situation had become perilous in Germany, the Stark boys were young and adventurous: Before the Queen Mary sailed ("We went classy," Walter Stark winks), they had time to visit Paris. Although Herman Stark had managed to get a significant amount of money out of Germany, into Amsterdam, they were not able to access those funds. The Stark brothers each carried 10 marks, all they were allowed to take with them.

On Sept. 19, 1938, Herman Osnos met Walter and Werner in New York City. He and his wife drove them back, Stark recalls, "in their LaSalle sedan, on newly completed portions of the Pennsylvania Turnpike."

Two months later, on Nov. 8, his parents and sister got an anonymous phone call, warning them to leave their home. The next night was Kristallnacht, a night of Nazi terror in Munich — and the Starks hid in the Black Forest for 10 days.

Osnos supported the two young men until they began working — and helped them to find jobs. One of the last letters in the file is from Osnos to Harry Bennett at the Ford Motor Co., seeking a job for Walter Stark. He was able to enroll in the Ford Trade School, and eventually graduated from Wayne State University as a chemical engineer.

On Feb. 9, 1939, Stark's parents and sister also arrived in New York, with the help of Herman Osnos. "My father brought them to Detroit and surprised Walter and Werner," says Gilbert Osnos, who also shares a vivid recollection of sharing a Passover Seder in 1939 with the reunited Stark family. Then a child of 8, Osnos says, "It was a seder that I will never forget. How could anybody forget that?"