

DR. LEO HENRYK STERNBACH'S CHILDHOOD IN OPATIJA

OPATIJSKO DJETINJSTVO DR. LEA HENRYKA STERNBACHA

Sanja Simper*

SUMMARY

This paper studies the childhood of Dr. Leo H. Sternbach, an eminent American scientist, in his native Opatija in the period of 1908 – 1921. His father, Mihael Abraham Sternbach, a Polish Jew, after completing his studies in pharmacy and after a short practice in Poland moved to Opatija at the beginning of the 20th century. There, he successfully ran a rented pharmacy and met his future wife, Piroška Kohn. The family played an important role in the life of the Jewish community of Opatija so Mihael A. Sternbach filled the post of The Community's president in the period from 1923 to 1926 after it was legally constituted. They lived in a rented flat on the second floor of the Villa Jadran, close to the pharmacy and on the main street of Opatija. Two sons, Leo and Gyula were to be born in Opatija. Leo, the older one, will finish his elementary school there. However, because of Italian occupation in 1918 and the annexation of Opatija to the Kingdom of Italy, German schools were closed down so he could not continue his education in German language. Leo was to carry on his schooling in Villach first, then Graz (Austria) and complete it in Bielitz (Bielsko – Biala) in Silesia, southern Poland, where the family moved in 1926. This decision was taken on grounds of economic as well as other problems that emerged as consequences of altered political circumstances in Opatija. This paper is also partly based on autobiographical notes by Dr. Leo Henryk Sternbach and the interviews conducted with him through e – mail in May 2005.

Key words: Leo H. Sternbach, biography; Jewish community, Opatija/Abbazia, Croatia, 19th, 20th century

* Sanja Simper, The Eugen Kumičić Grammar School Opatija, 2, Drage Gervaisa, 51410 Opatija
E-mail address: sanja.dukic.delogu@ri.htnet.hr

JEWISH COMMUNITY IN OPATIJA

Opatija, with its setting of a fashionable seaside health spa at the end of the 19th century, offered interesting business prospects to Jewish settlers originating mostly from Central and Eastern Europe, with a prevailing number of Hungarian Jews who started coming after 1892 [1,2]. It was then that the Southern Railway Society from Vienna (*Südbahn – Gesellschaft*) built the Mandria Bazaar in the town centre. The first Jewish families permanently settled in Opatija, attracted by the development of the health spa that was set off by massive investment of the Viennese Southern Railway Society. These families pursued their business activities within the building mentioned and lived nearby. The Jewish incomers who kept on coming in the course of the first decades of the 20th century, through their financial potential and expertise contributed to the development of activities vital for the tourist offer of Opatija. The cosmopolitan spirit of the milieu enabled a high level of integration into the predominantly Catholic community. According to the memories of Leo Sternbach, apart from the autochthonous Croats living in the surrounding areas, it was also composed of numerous nations of the Austro – Hungarian Monarchy. Furthermore, he points out that since the end of 19th century, it was the Jewish entrepreneurs that played the leading role in business [3]. Among them, there was a significant number of merchants and many were involved in tourist industry as hotel or tourist agency owners or managers [4].

From the early days, Opatija directed its development towards health spa tourism, so consequently, at the turn of the century and between the wars, numerous medical doctors set up their offices and clinics there.

THE STERNBACH FAMILY

It is understandable that such environment presented itself as a means to providing good business opportunities to Mihael Abraham Sternbach, a Polish Jew from Przemysl in Galicia (a one-time part of the Austro - Hungarian monarchy). Upon completion of his studies in pharmacy and practice in Lavov, he decided to start up a pharmacy in Opatija, the elite Austrian health spa on the Adriatic (*Figure 1*). He rented a pharmacy by the name of “Kromir & Poriz” at the Mandria Bazaar in the main street of Opatija (as Leo Sternbach recalls, it was one of the three pharmacies supplying the towns of Opatija, Lovran and Volosko during the World War I) [3]. In addition to the pharmacy and post office, the building housed



Figure 1. Mihael A. Sternbach, 1920

Slika 1. Mihael A. Sternbach, 1920.

„Laurol“

Abbazianer Franzbranntwein mit Seewasser

In den Sanatorien und von prakt. Aerzten angewendet als **schmerstillendes, nervenberuhigendes, die Haut abhärtendes** Mittel; auch als **Mundwasser**, zur **Haarpflege** zur Massage und zu Waschungen, gegen **Insectenstiche** zu benützen.

Erzeugungsstelle und Hauptdepot: Apotheke **Camus Sternbach**, Abbazia, Bazar Mandria, Postgebäude. Telefon 43.

Figure 2 "Laurol", a remedy from the Sternbach Pharmacy

Slika 2. "Laurol", jedan od pripravaka iz Sternbachove ljekarne

numerous other business establishments such as: Kaddisch Musical Instruments, a kosher butcher's shop owned by a Jew called Hus, a gift shop owned by Abu Khalil, a Palestinian, while later, the Barbini Italian restaurant was opened. Apparently, the business flourished; the pharmacy offered a wide variety of pharmaceutical preparations and Sternbach himself launched a highly successful business project as an inventor of some remedies: e.g. Ovol (*ovolecithin pills*) and Laurol, used for dermatological treatment of rheumatic difficulties made from laurel leaves (*Figure 2*). The 35 – year – old Mihael Sternbach will meet here in Opatija his future wife, a seventeen – year – old Piroška (Piri) Cohn, a Hungarian of Jewish origin from Oroshaza (near Szeged in Hungary) who regularly spent her summer holidays with her parents in her grandmother's villa (*Figure 3*).

Their relationship was in the beginning a matter of concern for her parents since Mihael was a Polish Jew and as such, a member of the lowest Jewish social class. Still, this relationship was crowned with marriage in 1907 and on 7th May 1908 Leo Henryk Sternbach was born in Opatija, the elder of the two sons [3] (*Figure 4, 5*).



Figure 3 Piroška (Piri) Sternbach, neè Cohn, 1907

Slika 3. Piroška (Piri) Sternbach, rođena Cohn, 1907.

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Cognome	<i>Sternbach</i>	Nome	<i>Leo</i>	
Paternità	<i>di Giuseppe</i>	Maternità	<i>di Piri Colan</i>	
Comune	ABBAZIA	Comune	<i>Volosca</i>	
Provincia	DI NASCITA	Provincia	di pertinenza	
Stato		Sudditanza		
giorno		<i>6</i>		Nazionalità
mese		<i>V</i>		Condizione
anno	<i>1908</i>	Confessione		
Stato Civile	<i>cel</i>			

70/47

Acquistò la pertinenza al Comune di Volosca-Abbazia	
Cittadino Italiano	
Residente nel Comune di Volosca-Abbazia dall'anno	<i>1908</i>
Abitazione	<i>Abb. 26</i>
<i>lancillato per trasferimento di residenza a</i>	
<i>Bratonia il 15-10-24</i>	

Figure 4 Leo H. Sternbach's prescription note (State Archive in Rijeka)

Slika 4. Anagrafska kartica Lea H. Sternbacha (Državni arhiv Rijeka)

The family lived in a rented four – room flat, on the second floor of the Villa Jadran, close to the pharmacy and on the main road, (its address was 26, Abbazia, today's 114, Maršal Tito Street). Sternbach recalled that the flat was connected with the pharmacy by a bell in case of nighttime emergencies [3]. In his autobiography, he writes:



Figure 5 Brothers Leo (left) and Giuszy (right) Sternbach

Slika 5. Braća Leo (lijevo) i Giuszy (desno) Sternbach

“Apartments were, at that time, rather primitive compared to the ones existing nowadays. We had a four – room apartment (rather small rooms) consisting of my parents’ bedroom, our (Gyuszi’s and mine) bed/play – room, a dining room and a drawing room (“Salon”) which was used only when we had guests. We had only one toilet (WC), no bathroom. We washed in ceramic washbasins. The water (cold), we poured from a big pitcher standing next to it. Once a week we bathed in a public bathing establishment which had warm water. We had electric lights in every room except the kitchen, which was quite dark, since the only window opened on to the staircase. It was lit by a simple kerosene lamp. Refrigerators did not exist; we had an icebox, which, on rare occasions, contained ice. Butter was kept in the summer under running water (from our pipes), which was quite cold, since it came from Monte Maggiore (Učka), 1400 meters high. In winter, we kept food between the double windows. We had double windows everywhere. In winter, rooms were heated by wood in Dutch – style tile stoves. For cooking we had in the kitchen, an iron stove heated with wood (only wood was used).

It also contained a water reservoir, which yielded our warm water. No gas; for quick heating of small quantities, for instance my father’s shaving water, we had a very simple alcohol burner. We had a maid who lived in the room in the attic.” [3].

After emigrating with his family in 1926, he visited Opatija only once in his later years, (on occasion of his trip to Venice), but he still remembered:

“The town consisted of villas, hotels, apartment buildings and laurel woods [...] the highest building had five floors (elevators did not exist, as far as I remember). It had two parallel main streets, one called “Hauptstrasse” (Main Street) with an electric car line (tramway), the other “Neue Strasse” (New Street). Both streets, as I recall, were unpaved. In addition, it had many smaller streets, some of them connecting the two main streets. Most of the streets could also be used by vehicles, which were in those times, horse drawn carriages (“Fiaker” in German). The quite dusty streets were sprinkled in summer with sea – water [...] in Abbazia, we had per winter, in the best case only one or two days of wet and heavy snow, always a great event for us, children. The evergreen laurel leaves looked beautiful, snow – covered branches hanging low under the weight of the heavy snow...”

The family belonged to the higher middle class of Opatija’s citizens, like most of other Jewish settlers. Integrative processes caused some parts of the local Jewish community to become estranged from the traditional and religious way of life and this holds true for the Sternbach family as well. It came down to observing major Jewish holidays, such as Yom Kippur or Rosh Hashanah. Religious services were performed in adapted rooms of the Breiner Guesthouse and later in the Stern Guesthouse. The Jewish cemetery was built in 1912 while the construction of the synagogue, never to be completed, commenced in 1926 [6, 1, 5]. Leo Sternbach recalls that at Jewish holidays and on Shabbat, some people did not work. Apparently, in those days, there lived in Opatija a small group of Orthodox Jews whose number would increase when the Jewish tourists came to visit Opatija [1, 2, 3]. In his autobiography, Leo Sternbach writes that neither he, nor his parents had ever been hiding their Jewish origins: “I was born a Jew.”, still, he refused to participate in religious activities, claiming that religion in the bottom line is “senseless and negative”. Nevertheless, this belief never prompted him to refute Judaism or to consider conversion to Christianity [5] (Figure 6).

In the early days, there were no Jewish institutions in Opatija; legally the Jews of Opatija were under authority of the Jewish Community of Trieste [1,5,6]. The foundations of its autonomous rule were laid on the eve of World War I, and among the distinguished members of the administration that took over the leadership of the community during the war, was Mihael Sternbach [2,5]. Due to absence of many members, the life of the community in the institutional sense was regulated as late as 1922,

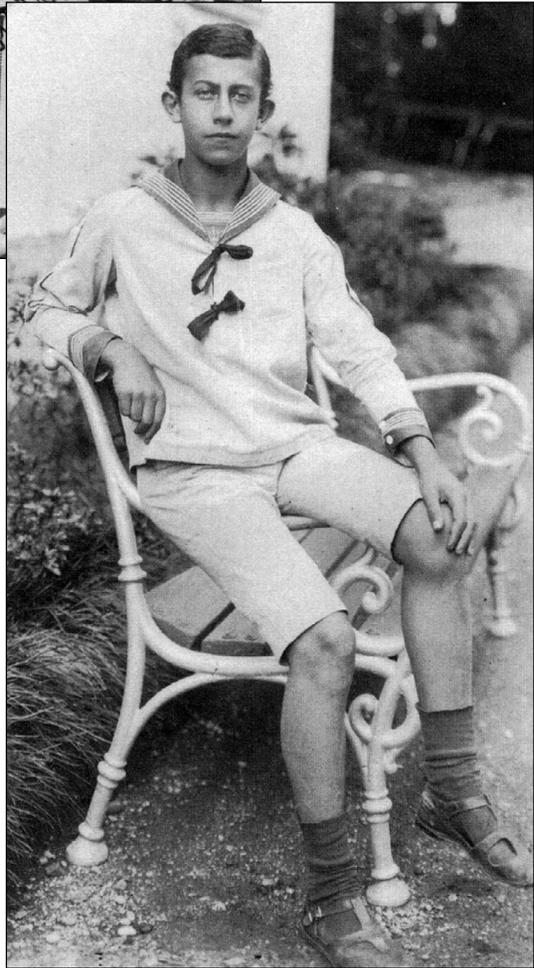
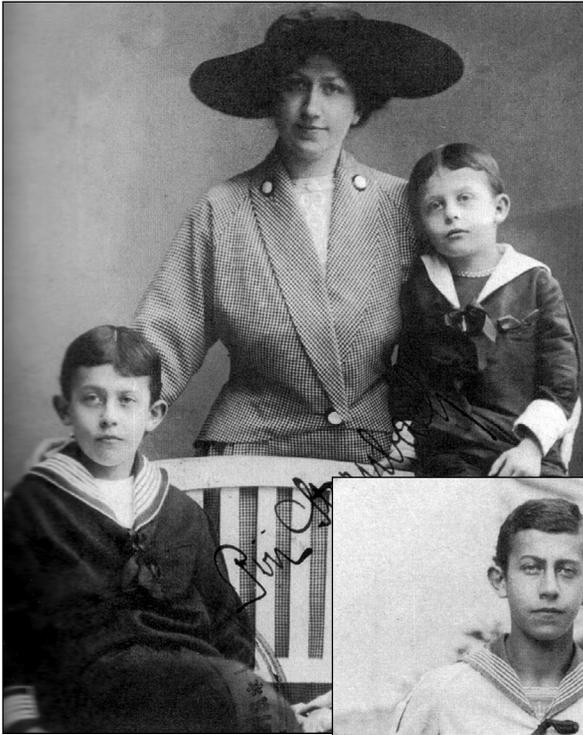


Figure 6. Piroška Sternbach with sons (top left), older son Leo and younger Giuszy 1917; Leo H. Sternbach (bottom right)

Slika 6. Piroška Sternbach sa sinovima (gore lijevo), stariji Leo i mlađi Giuszy 1917; Leo H. Sternbach (dolje desno)

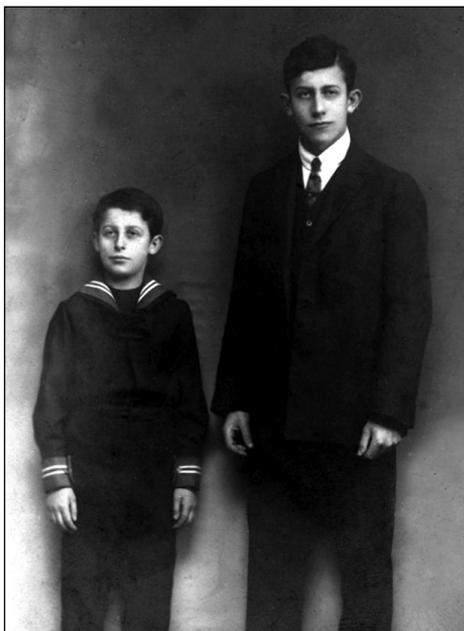


Figure 7. Giuszy (left) and Leo Sternbach (right), 1924

Slika 7. Giuszy (lijevo) i Leo Sternbach (desno), 1924.

within the Kingdom of Italy by the Statute of a newly established Jewish Community of Opatija. In February of 1923, elections for the administrative bodies were held and Mihael Sternbach was elected a president, the post he would hold until he moved to Poland [1,5]. Leo Sternbach started his elementary school in September 1914, when he turned six, and finished it in 1918. He attended a private German school in Opatijja (*Deutsche Privat Volksschule in Abbazia mit Öffentlichkeitsrecht*). It was subsidised by a Society for Promotion of the German School in Opatija (*Verein zur Förderung einer deutschen Schule in Abbazia*) founded in 1896. The school operated in a private house and in 1901 its very own building was erected (today a school for catering services in Opatija) [7]. Leo mastered the school curriculum with ease, showing even then, a strong inclination towards sciences and languages while history always posed a major problem and this continued to be so during his further education. He remembers from this period some anti-Semitic outbursts on the part of his school peers, among whom, he says, the Austrian children especially despised the Croats while both groups together, the Austrians as well as the Croats despised the Jews. He recollects:

“When they found out that I was a Jew, they no longer wanted to play with me [...] . At school the Croats called me “Cifut”, which I think was a pejorative name for the Jews .When I told my parents what had happened at school they would say that I was at school in order to gain knowledge and not to pay attention to empty gossip.”

With time, he learnt to bear the embarrassments that kept recurring throughout his youth in other social environments with calm, not showing the bitterness they caused. It made him stronger in his belief that only by building up his potentials to the fullest and relying on his own intelligence and intellectual fervour would he succeed in such an environment.

As he started attending the school, World War I broke out. Although he did not experience it directly, as Opatija was spared the devastation, some events became embedded in his childhood memory, which he later noted. He later remembered the overflies of a military plane above the town, or a sound of an explosion of a bomb, dropped somewhere in the woods nearby, causing minor damage. Clear in his memory were distant sounds of cannons, firing on the Italian front in the battles of the Isonzo River (Soča), which could be heard, according to his words, all the way to Opatija. He also mentioned deterioration of economic situation causing shortage of clothing while regarding the shortage of basic groceries he said the following:

“Flour used in baking of bread was very often “enriched” with sawdust. When flour was not available, polenta, a mush made with cornmeal, was used instead of bread. After cooking, it was cooled until it solidified and the cut into ½ inch thick slices which could be spread with fig preserve. Fig preserve could be made since fig trees grew very well in Abbazia climate and figs were rather sweet and therefore practically no sugar was needed.”

The wartime conditions contributed to the decline of the workload in the pharmacy, where Leo would help his father since he could not afford an assistant. He remembers from this period:

“The workload was minimal. We ate lunch in the pharmacy and after lunch, I was in charge while my father had a twenty – minute nap. If a German - speaking customer appeared, I told him or her in German to wait a little. If a Croat came [...] I was taught to tell him or her “čekajte (pronounced tchek-ayte) malo” which meant, “wait a little” so my father could finish his nap.”

Since, as child, Leo used to spend quite a lot of time in the pharmacy, helping his father as much as he could, it can be inferred that this is where his interest in medicine and his fascination with chemical processes,

occurring during the process of remedy preparations, were triggered, events that would determine his future professional career.

It is probable that his father's gift for inventions was passed over to the son, who later perfected it into genius.

After the World War I, that contributed to the dissolution of the Austro – Hungarian monarchy, and a short – term occupation of the town by the allied forces, Italian occupation of 1918 followed and the annexation of Opatija to the Kingdom of Italy. In his memoirs, Leo Sternbach noted a recollection of an event that happened during D'Annunzio's occupation of Rijeka when, due to the dissatisfaction caused by the fact that Rijeka was proclaimed a free state in 1920, the occupying authorities at night blew up the bridge that separated the occupied part of Rijeka and the Yugoslav town of Sušak. Later he said:

“It must have been a tremendous explosion since I remember that the sound and shock woke me up and almost threw me out of my bed.”

Still, in some of his reminiscences, one feels the childlike fascination, e.g. where he talks about the children's games with Italian soldiers. He describes a game with explosive matter that the soldiers supplied them with, where different compounds caused chemical reactions triggering sensational effects that the children found fascinating. [3]. Only later will he realise that Opatija of his playful childhood was also a stage for events of momentous political significance that were to change his life soon. Thus, wartime circumstances brushed on him, a ten – year – old boy, as well. New authorities, following the policy of Italianisation closed down all German schools. Since Leo, as his brother Gyuszi (diminutive of Hungarian name Gyula) did not speak Italian, they resumed their education by taking private lessons in German. Several families in Opatija with the same problem joined their financial efforts and “imported” a teacher from Austria.

At the end of the academic year in June, Leo and his brother went to Villach, Austria, the nearest town with a German grammar school (*Real Gymnasium*), to take their tests and to be promoted to a higher class. Due to these circumstances and a decline in the quality of their education that lasted until 1921, the Sternbach children scored only average results at their exams in Villach. It was his opinion that the average results were the result of low quality of their tutors' lessons and the fact that they kept changing. Gyuszy took his exams only one year, since Italians, to accelerate Italianisation, admitted him into the Italian school in Opatija, although his knowledge was only basic. He remained at school until the

family moved to Poland in 1926. Meanwhile, Leo and his parents also started learning the language.

Leo's Italian was still not good enough to attend the Italian school so he continued with private lessons. Since his education kept on stagnating, in 1921, on the recommendation of his Latin tutor in Villach, his parents decided that a thirteen – year – old Leo would move to Villach so he could continue his schooling as a regular pupil. He recollects that in the new environs and because of the separation from his parents; he suffered from loneliness, even more so because of the anti-Semitism that was gaining force. The parents decided to transfer him to another school in Graz, which had a better railway connection with Opatija. There he lived with a Jewish family and also obtained religious education, which made integration into society more difficult because in the early twenties the anti – Semitism was influenced even more markedly by the Nazi ideology than was the case in the previous environment. The parents were seriously concerned because of their son's depression and separation in Graz and no less were they worried about their deteriorating financial circumstances. Namely, once lucrative, the pharmacy yielded almost no income during the war, and the acquired reserves, which they, for patriotic reasons, invested into war bonds of the state that fell apart, was lost. The family faced grave prospects, aggravated by the pressure of Italian authorities to take Italian citizenship.

However, since they did not want it, the father decided that they would move to the recently restored country of Poland and take Polish citizenship. They went to Krakow, where two of his brothers lived, but despite the support of the family, the beginnings were tough. They rented a first floor flat in a new apartment block in the Kazimierz district, the Jewish ghetto, where the father could open a pharmacy after overcoming endless red tape problems. Leo had to Learn Polish now, the mother tongue of his father that had not been used at home at all; he used to talk to his mother in Hungarian. Since the parents had to stay in Opatija for a year or two, to settle their affairs, organise the removal and obtain a concession to start up a pharmacy in Krakow, Leo went to Poland by himself, to Bielitz (Bielsko – Biała) in Silesia where he enrolled at a German grammar school and continued his schooling. He would occasionally go home to Opatija to his parents to spend the holidays there (*Figure 7*). Apart from the painstaking effort of learning a new language during the final years of his secondary education, Leo spent this period peacefully, dealing with the usual school problems, in an environment in which he, being a Jew, felt

accepted. Thus, in 1926, at the age of 18, he passed his finals and the very same summer his parents at last arrived to Krakow after settling in order their affairs in Opatija. The father eventually obtained the licence to open the pharmacy in Krakow. Besides the problems of adapting to the new environment, this year was marked by a tragic event in the family; Leo's younger brother Gyuszi, at the age of fifteen, died of scarlet fever, an incurable disease in those days, leaving his parents devastated with grief.

Upon leaving Opatija, a period in the life of the Sternbach family was irrevocably over; the period that they lived through in the same way that Opatija did, a period first marked by splendour of an Austrian jet set health spa of the European leisured classes and then by the major war caused by turbulent political changes, followed by stagnation and uncertainty and finally with the Italian occupation. A ray of hope appeared, at least temporarily, when they moved to Poland and a bright future was smiling at Leo as he enrolled at the University of Krakow while the gate to the world of science that he longed for opened for him.

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Recollections and autobiographical data partly taken from interviews conducted by the author with Dr. Leo. H. Sternbach through electronic mail in May 2005

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SAŽETAK

U priopćenju je riječ o djetinjstvu uglednog američkog znanstvenika dr. Lea H. Sternbacha u rodnoj Opatiji (1908.–1921.) gdje se njegov otac Mihael Abraham Sternbach, poljski Židov, nakon završenog studija farmacije i kratkotrajne prakse u Poljskoj, početkom XX. stoljeća doselio i uspješno vodio iznajmljenu ljekarnu u Bazaru Mandria te tu upoznao i svoju buduću suprugu Pirošku Cohn. Obitelj je zauzimala istaknutu ulogu u životu opatijske židovske zajednice te je Mihael A. Sternbach obnašao i ulogu predsjednika opatijske židovske općine nakon njezina utemeljenja (1923.–1926.). Stanovali su u iznajmljenom stanu na drugom katu vile Jadran, u blizini ljekarne, na glavnoj opatijskoj prometnici. Njima će se u Opatiji roditi dvojica sinova, Leo i Gyula. Stariji Leo završit će u Opatiji osnovnu školu. Srednjoškolsko će obrazovanje, zatvaranjem njemačkih škola nakon talijanske okupacije 1918. te priključenjem Opatije Kraljevini Italiji, nastaviti najprije u Villachu, potom u Grazu, a završiti u Bielitzu (Bielsko – Biala) u Šleziji, južna Poljska, gdje se obitelj iselila 1926. zbog ekonomskih i drugih problema koji su nastali promjenom političkih prilika u Opatiji.

Priopćenje je djelomično utemeljeno na autobiografskim zapisima dr. Lea Henry Sternbacha i intervjuu koji je s njim vođen preko elektroničke pošte u svibnju 2005.

Ključne riječi: Leo H. Sternbach, biografija; židovska zajednica, Opatija/Abbazia, Hrvatska, XIX., XX. st.