

Tom Stoppard assesses the cost of his charmed life

By [Belinda Luscombe](#)

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Playwright Tom Stoppard photographed at Cafe Sabarsky in the Neue Galerie on Sept. 15, 2022. Evelyn Freja for TIME

On the day of his mother’s funeral in 1996, the playwright Tom Stoppard had a little spat with his stepfather Kenneth, the man who married his widowed mother in India and took her and her two young sons back with him to the U.K. “It was like the hour my mother died and we came home from the hospital and he was very upset and he didn’t entirely approve of things I was involved in—Jewish questions—and he just blurted out that I should stop using his name. But it was just an expression of grief,” says Stoppard. He regrets ever mentioning it. “I shouldn’t have told people about it. It was true for about 10 minutes.”

At least, that’s how Stoppard tells the story now. But he’s told it before, in an article he wrote for *Talk* magazine in 1999. The argument in that story took place days after the funeral. And his stepfather—essentially the only father he remembers—made the request in a letter, to which the English language’s most famous living playwright replied that it would be impractical. That version of the tale appeared in Stoppard’s authorized biography and in many of the profiles of him since. Very little else is known of Kenneth Stoppard, except that he was a major in the military and an

ardent Anglophile. The anti-Semitic name change incident will forever loom large in the way he is remembered.

The vagaries of memory and how people fare in the erratic habits of history is one theme at the heart of Stoppard's newest play, *Leopoldstadt*, which opens on [Broadway on Oct 2](#). It traces a wealthy Jewish family in Vienna from 1899 to 1950, from prominence to oblivion, from struggling to assimilate to struggling to preserve their Jewish identity, from wealthy arts patrons to having their contributions erased. It has 37 characters. "I wanted to write a big play," Stoppard says. "I didn't want my plays to just dwindle away to short pieces as though I'd run out of steam." He stops and thinks. "Put it this way, if I was going to finish with this play, I wanted to finish with something substantial."

The familiar Holocaust narrative is made compelling because it is Stoppard's most overtly biographical play, although the Stoppard-like character is only a bit part. It began to germinate in the former Tomas Straussler's mind after the demise of communism loosened travel restrictions, allowing some relatives to visit from Czechoslovakia, where he was born. Stoppard's fame had spread far enough that a cousin's child, Sarka, came calling, and he met her for lunch, as one does with distant relatives, in a cafe near his office.

Stoppard had known he was Jewish, but his mother had been vague about the details. Sarka was not. "She wrote down the family tree on a napkin and went through them all," says Stoppard, sitting in the New York City's Neue Galerie beneath the Gustav Klimt portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer, famously looted by the Nazis from a Jewish home in Vienna. He'd had no idea his mother had several sisters. "I'd say 'So what happened to her? And what happened to her?' and Sarka would say, 'Auschwitz and Auschwitz.' And the four grandparents, of course, they died in different places." It's a scene he makes use of in *Leopoldstadt*.

Stoppard later would wonder whether his obliviousness to the possibility he had lost relatives in the Holocaust, or to how close he and his brother had been to perishing, was "willful purblindness" on his part, or a habit he adopted to protect his mother. "She was quite a fearful person," he says. "The Cold War was very cold; at certain periods, it was icy. So it didn't do any good [for people] to have relatives in the West. Or at least that was my mother's view of things."

But it was not as if Stoppard was unaware of the cost of the war. His father, a doctor, had been sent with his family to Singapore, after executives at his father's employer, the shoe company Bata, discerned that things were taking a turn in Europe. As the war reached them there, the family fled again, this time without their father. He stayed behind, figuring doctors would be needed. Their ship was bombed and turned for India instead of Australia. When his father finally chose to escape, his ship did not make it.

Now 85, Stoppard counts himself as blessed, a word he actually uses. He still has the energy and acuity to write five-act plays that touch on as wide a range of subjects as the history of number theory, the Hapsburg empire and the early days of Freud. He's married, for the third time, to Sabrina Guinness of the beer family, although he's careful to dispel any notions of a family fortune. His family seems as intact as a third-wife family can be. As we speak, he's texting a grown son, whose birthday has been neglected, what with the death of Queen Elizabeth II and his play having early previews on Broadway, but the tone is light. (He reads one text aloud "Time Magazine? Man of the year?") His hearing has mostly absented itself but his thatch of grey hair is very present; his voice retains its richness with a hint of speech impediment around the Rs. And after cheating the Grim

Reaper so many times as a boy, he's outwitted him as an adult too; he remains an enthusiastic smoker.

A lot of Stoppard's stepfather's love for country has rubbed off. He was very moved, he says, by the queen's death, and was sad not to be in the U.K. when it took place, so he could have joined the long queue to walk past the coffin. "I adored her," he says. "She was a very constant person. She had very high standards and she just has a great sense of history and the dignity of the institution." While Stoppard has often got involved in free speech and human rights causes, he's no revolutionary. "I absolutely revere the idea of a constitutional monarchy," he says. "I don't want the head of state to be a job you can lobby for." In her youth, Stoppard's wife was briefly linked with the man who is now King Charles III; they're not sure whether that—and Stoppard's O.B.E.—will qualify them for a ticket to the Coronation, but he'd like to go. He considers the new king to be "a very good soul."

It's hard to miss the fact that Stoppard specializes in two types of plays: histories and comedies, not unlike another well-known British playwright who lived under an Elizabethan reign. After a couple of years of dreary times, audiences could be forgiven for hoping he was applying his wit to a hilarious farce about all we've endured. But it is not to be. "We need a laugh. You're so right," he says, noting that several theater producers had made that request. "I don't feel at the moment that I'm the person to provide it." Besides, Stoppard doesn't work that way. "Insofar as comedy and tragedy pass through me," he says, "they emerge intricately connected."

All writing, the saying goes, is rewriting, and Stoppard gives off the sense that he's in a revision phase. There's the reckoning with his own family history in *Leopoldstadt*. There's the attempt to amend the history of the Major. And he'd like to write again about moral philosophy, as he did with *Jumpers*, one of his early hits, which intertwined the story of a professor with a gymnastic team. "Fifty years ago, I thought philosophy was just thoughts you had in the bath," he says. "I started reading more and in a way that picture was spoiled. There's a bigger connection between ethics and life. And that's probably worth a more serious play than the one I wrote." Next time, he says, he will omit the acrobats.

The revising may be part of Stoppard's reckoning with his own legacy. He remembers waking up on his 23rd birthday, shortly after leaving his job as a journalist, and "having this terrible feeling that I was a couple of years behind where I should be," he says. "I hadn't started writing anything for posterity." Now that posterity has been taken care of—and then some—he can look a little harder at the source of all that work. "I've essentially avoided writing about my own life," he says. "And that began to feel like a sort of indulgence on my part." Even a charmed life, it seems, can bear some examination.