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Interview with Erna Stern
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PREFACE

The following oral history testimony is the result of a videotaped interview with Erna Stern, conducted by Linda Kuzmack on July 3, 1989 on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The interview took place in Washington, DC and is part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection of oral testimonies. Rights to the interview are held by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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ERNA STERN

July 3, 1989

TECHNICAL CONVERSATION

Q: Mrs. Stern, would you please tell me your full name?

A: Erna Stern. Born...born Tebel. (Clearing throat)

Q: Where were you born? In what city?

A: I was born in Krotoszyn, in Poland.¹

Q: In what year?

A: 1901.

Q: And your maiden name was what?

A: Was Tebel.

Q: Tebel.

A: And then I married Blachmann--my daughter's husband...father--and he was killed by the Nazis.

Q: Okay.

A: Then I married Stern. That's my...my name is now Erna Stern. (Laughing)

Q: I see. Okay. Thank you. Let's go back, if we could, to your childhood. Tell us about the town. Did you grow up in the same town you were born in? Tell us again the name of the town, and what it was like.

A: The town was Krotoszyn in Poland. It was Germany in this time. After the First World War, it became Polish. But I was...I grew up in the German time. And we had rather a good time there. It was...we didn't know of anti-Semitism. I was the only Jewish child for 10 years in the class. I was 10 years the first in the class. And when I graduated, a man from the Presidency, from [Felix (ph)], came to give me 18 books of [Gelpace (ph)] because I was the best in school. So it shows there was no animosity. When we are good, we are good--no matter Jewish or not-Jewish. And I had very good friends, Jewish and not-Jewish

¹ Located between Poznan and Wrocaw.

friends. I was invited to all non-Jewish affairs, so much that my father said, "You don't have to go all over." And then the maruszka came...

Q: What is a maruszka?

A: Maruszka is a maid, the Polish maid. And she said, "Fraulein Erna, they ask for you. I have to bring you." So I went all over. But I was against... (Pause) This was the First World War, yah. I have to come... I was against the war. And the Germans made progress and progress; and I said to the girls, "Do you realize how many of your friends get killed?" And they didn't answer it. When the war was over, they came and they said, "You know, we were sometimes very mad at you. But now we understand you were right. We lost the war." And then when the war over... My father was in the war in Russia.

Q: What did your father do?

A: We had the department store in Krotoszyn, yah. And my mother was there. And she was little; but, oh ho, very big. Yah. And I was young. I had to do schooling, and be in the store sometimes. We had lots of people working for us. But the men got in the Army, so we had mostly girls. And then I had to go to the offices what for...for two tickets for food--not food, for clothing tickets. And [I] had to go even to pay the tax, and to tell them that we don't...we are not able to do so much. My mother was very, very good in the store, but not outside. So young as I was, I had to do that all. But just the same, I was the first in class. And then, when the war was over, my father came home from Russia. And the Poles came in. And they started to kill and to shoot and to...were very bad. They said we had cannons on the roof...on the top of the roof, and you know... And so...

Q: Explain. I don't understand.

A: This is...they went to my father, they want to shoot from the roof. So my father said... So, my father said, "Man is born naked. Let's go." So we took a wagon and a horse, and the maid, who was living in the city next to us; and we went to Breslau [**Pol:** Wroc_aw], where my grandparents were living. They had a big house, and we could stay there until we found an apartment. In Breslau, I had again pretty good time. I went to...went to town (ph), to dancing lessons, and met two boys. And there I met my father...Gerda's father.

Q: Tell me about him?

A: He was a fine, wonderful man. Good-hearted, educated. And his family was very nice, and he was the only son. He was very uh...spoiled. And my mother-in-law said, "If you marry him, I tell you he will not eat this. He will not eat this, he will not do that." And when I married him, he ate everything. (Laughing) Without forcing him.

Q: (Coughing)

A: We were very happy together. And then he wanted to go to Cuba. And we came to the boat...

Q: Let's...let's not get to Cuba, to the boat, quite so fast. Tell me... Tell me some of the events leading up to your getting ready for the boat. Why did you want... Tell me first what happened when the Germans took over. When the Germans came to power, you were in Breslau.

A: In Breslau.

Q: Right. And Hitler came to power. How did that affect you? How did that affect you?

A: I was not affected at all, in the beginning. They came to us and they said, "You are not... You are Germans. What you want?" And they were nice to us, and we had nothing to fear. That was our... Smarter people left earlier, and didn't listen. We had a nice office. I don't know if you are familiar with [Sendelberg (ph)]. It's a very internationally thing, for furniture and things like this. And we were the representative from Posen [Pol: Pozna_], Breslau and all the other part of Poland. And we had an office, of course. And we had eight other companies. So we were very well off. The business went beautifully. Hitler made good business. And the Hitlers came in not in uniform--in civil. And we had nothing. That was...that was our downfall. Gerda was in a Catholic School, in the [mid-lyceum (ph)], and had nothing to worry at first. In fact, she went to the German Olympic plays...games. And then one day she came home and she said, "I cannot stay anymore. Not the teachers, but the kids are very anti-Semitic." So we brought her to a Jewish gymnasium. She went to Jewish gymnasium. And then my husband was very smart. He said to her...he said, "There is no future for her." She was very smart, too. Always the best. And we sent to her to Wolfratshausen. And that is a not a school for schooling--for education--but for sewing, for...for even milking cows, and feeding chickens and everything. And it was like a household school.

Q: What was the name of the school again?

A: Wolfratshausen was the place. The school name, I don't know.

Q: Okay.

A: Anyway, then when Hitler came to the school--and she will tell you this maybe, too--the kids had to leave from one hour to another. Leaving everything, and just leave the school. So Gerda was sitting on the station, waiting for a train to come, to go to Breslau. When she finally came to Breslau, the Nazis started to take the men in camps. So my mother-in-law was a widow, and my father and my husband were hiding there. And I was with my mother. Gerda, knowing...not knowing that Gerda will come home.

Q: Excuse me. I don't understand. You said your mother was a widow.

A: My mother-in-law.

Q: Oh, your mother-in-law. Okay.

A: And I was there. And Gerda came home, was nobody there. She thought we were all taken already. She got the shock of her life. And then we found each other again. And that's what make it to try to get out. But, of course, it was...we had to get visas and we had to get ships.

Q: How did you do that? And who did that? Who arranged that?

A: My um...me and my husband. Yah, we went. But when we bought the tickets, the people on the... What was that line? They knew exactly that we will not come in. Because they knew the trouble what was in Cuba. And we had to buy for 2 tickets-- round trip--to... They know that. So we went. We had to pack; and we could take...as I told you, we could take clotheses and linen and silver for three people, all sets. That was all. And we sent this to Cuba. And then we didn't get into Cuba.

Q: Alright. You are...you have packed. You have sent your stuff uh...to the boat. Now there's you, your husband, and Gerda. What about your parents and your in-laws. What happened?

A: My mother-in-law took her own life. She said, "Not me!" "Without me," she said. And she killed herself. My parents were deported, and were killed. My mother was Theresienstadt. My father, I don't know. They were both killed. And my only brother, he was already in Brussels when we came to Brussels. and he was sent away with my husband to Gurs. And they were both deported and killed. Yah.

Q: So it was not easy.

A: Hmm?

Q: It was not easy.

A: No. Then we came to Brussels.

Q: Well, tell us... Before we get to Brussels. We know now what happened to your parents.

A: No, I didn't know.

Q: You didn't know. You had left them behind. You were going to the boat. Tell us what it was like. Take us through a day on the boat. You are on the boat, you and your husband and

Gerda. Where do you sleep?

A: Oh, like a normal passenger. We had...we paid a high price, and we had a good...good cabin, and we had good food, and we had entertainment. We didn't know not from nothing, then. We had dancing and [fooling around (ph)] and played cards. We didn't...we were happy to get out and to come to Cuba.

Q: Okay. When did you first realize that there might be trouble? When did you first realize there would be a problem?

A: When...when it came to...to landing. They said, "Another day." And, "Another day." And finally, they said... And there went correspondences with America. And then they said, "Have to go back." The people into water killed themselves; and was very, very hard for everybody.

Q: How did you feel?

A: How I felt? I didn't... You know, I am a very...always was-- I think that makes me so old. I was always pretty easy going. I didn't realize what can mean. We didn't! I tell you later something from Brussels. And we only were hoping they meant... They tried to bring us to Ecuador. They even tried to bring us to Dominica; and they tried to bring us all over. Nobody wanted the Jews. So finally, the King of Belgium... King Albert of Belgium made arrangements with Holland, France and England. If they all would--we were close to a thousand people there--if all would take 25 percent, so-to-speak, they will...he will take, too. That's how we landed in Europe, and not in Germany anymore. Yah. When we came to Belgium back, the Joint want to take us over. And my daughter was 17 years old, and she said, "We don't need this. We will do it ourself." And we took work out. She was... Thank goodness, from the school she could sew. And we took work out to [an old factory (ph)]...factory to sew blouses. And later my second husband came from... And we opened with hundred dollars a blouse manufactory.

Q: Okay. Back up a little. What happened to your first husband?

A: He was killed. My brother and he was killed.

Q: Okay. He had gone.

A: He was deported. He was deported from Gurs to...to camps, to the concentration camp.

Q: So it was just you and Gerda on the boat?

A: No. My husband was with us on the boat.

Q: Okay. Then what... Back up. Explain, if your husband was with you on the boat... You went to Belgium. What happened to your husband?

A: We all came back to Belgium from the boat.

Q: Okay. Then how did your husband get sent to Gurs, and you stayed.

A: Because the Germans came in. And the Belges [**Fr:** Belgians] said, "We want to save the men." And they sent all the Jews and non-Jewish Germans. The Germans came back, and the Jews were killed. The Belges meant it well. They sent them to... Yeah.

Q: They thought it would be safe there.

A: Yah. The men!

Q: Uh hmmm.

A: Yeah. And then when the Germans came to...to Brussels, yah. Gerda said, "We don't stay here again." We were offered to hide.

Q: Who offered to hide you?

A: Ger...Belges people. Belges people are very nice people. And Gerda said, "I cannot do that. We have to try something." So I bought false papers, identi[fi]cation cards.

Q: How did you do that, and from whom?

A: Two Jewish people, who unfortunately...he saved us, but he didn't make it. The false paper, they were sold there for a very high price. So I took. And French, two different--or they were Belge. I don't know. Two different cards. And Gerda and I... She had a suit and I had a suit. We had three brassieres. We had three panties. And I had the silver forks.

Q: Where? How did you hide them?

A: Then I took it all. The silver forks I could take. So with this, we were on... When my husband was gone, we want...she wanted to go to Daddy first. So I said to her, "We'll go to the fire." We did. We saw it. We went to terrible things, we went in...in... What's that... And I forgot the names...

Q: Tell us.

A: ...in Belgian. The Nuns took us in for one night. And the next morning at 4 o'clock, we went to have it tramway... What you call it? Strassenbahn [**Ger:** "streetcar"].

Q: A train.

A: Not train. In town. It was called like a bus...like buses.

Q: Okay.

A: You know, I speak French and this; I mix it up. And we come to the station. The little boy--friend of...boy, a friend of mine--I said, "[Lothar (ph)], what are you doing here?" "Oh," he said, "My mother run, jumped in the bus and is gone with my sister. And I wait for her." I said, "You cannot wait for her. She will not come back. Only later." I said, "I wait for you." So we are waiting for him...with him for hours; and the mother didn't come back. So I said, "Now we go to Dunkerque,² I think." And then we had some lunch. And then I said, "Now you go and wait here for your mother. I bet she will come out of the bus." And sure enough, she was running for him and came back. And he met again. That's why we are still very close friends. And then, we went back. Yah, we had to go back to Belgium. There were no way to go to see the father. But how to get back? There were convoys, like...like the soldiers arrive here. Trucks. And Gerda went on one truck; and I, with the woman and her two children, went on another one. Suddenly, the truck stops. Gerda comes over--17 years old. Said, "Mother, I don't know what will happen to us. He started to talk about the Germans...about the Jews, the Jews, the Jews. And I told him, 'You will stop here and let me out, or you will kill me. I am a Jew, so I don't listen to you any longer.'"

Q: Gerda had done this?

A: Gerda said. Oh yah! Yah! So he said, "My dear girl! Jews are good friends. My boss was a friend." You know, he were so... So, anyway, he went out, he ran for ice cream, bought us ice cream and brought us surprise to Liège, to a butcher. And we didn't say we are Germans. I told him [NB: the butcher] we are English. Because as Germans, they wouldn't...even Jews, they didn't understand the different [NB: difference] between Jews and Germans. We're Germans to them. So we stood [NB: stayed] the night there, and they were very nice. The next morning, this Nazi soldier comes and picks us up. We were so, you know, embarrassed. But it was the only way to be there. You have to lie sometimes.

Q: So what did you tell him? He picked you up because he thought you were English?

A: He knew that we want to go to Brussels.

Q: Ah.

² **Also:** Dunquerque, or **Eng:** Dunkirk. Town on the Atlantic coast of France near the Belgian border.

A: Yah. He picked us up. So then we came back to Brussels.

Q: Wait a minute. I don't understand. He picked you up to take you to Brussels?

A: Yes.

Q: How did he know to come and get you?

A: Because he brought you there...brought us there. He saw to it that we have a place to stay. After Gerda was so...

Q: This is a Nazi truck! Okay.

A: After Gerda was so fresh to him, he was...

Q: I didn't understand. So this was an actual Nazi?

A: Oh, yeah. They were Nazis.

Q: On the truck, who had taken you; and then they came...

A: And how did we get to these trucks? Gerda went to the German headquarters and told them a story that we are lost here, we want to go back to Brussels. And the officer over there, whatever he was, he said, "My Dear Girl, we are happy to hear the German tongue. Of course!" And he gave her the permission. Otherwise, you couldn't go on these trucks. And Gerda was very, very... Yah. Yah.

Q: Okay. Now I understand.

A: Yah. Because we couldn't hide in _____. We had to have a permission from the headquarter.

Q: Okay. So you have ridden now on this Nazi convoy. You have now gotten escorted the next day, by a Nazi, back to Brussels. What happened?

A: When we came to Brussels, I don't know how, we found... We left an apartment before, when we came from St. Louis. And we came there, and this lovely lady stole everything from us. And I said, "Why did...?" "You are alive," she said, "aren't you?" And so we moved to another place, where my friends were staying. And as I said, Gerda... Let's say, we got something from the Joint, I guess.

Q: How long did you live in Brussels?

A: From...'40 to '42.

Q: Did you live openly, or did you live on false papers?

A: No. The Belges were very nice. They gave us papers. They could not...we were not allowed to work. But we had papers and we were free to do and to travel and to do everything. Oh, Yah. Belges, you know, they didn't know for...they called us "Juif" [Fr: "Jew"]. But they didn't know. They never made any difference. So much that when I came to Jewish store, and she said... I told them in German. "What did you say?," she said. __ that you understand Yiddish. I said, "[Feine menschen (ph)]." "What you want from them?" They don't know, you know. That is the Jews in Belgium. Yah. "[Feine menschen (ph)]." Said, "Madam, you will find it out. You will find it out." Belgium. Very fine fine people. Yeah. In fact, we started in a...as I told you, this manufactory. We are not allowed to work. And a policeman who was...had papers for business or so... I don't know how I found him. You know, in...in... If you need something, you do; and if you are lucky, you make it. So I found this man. And he put our papers underneath, but he came out...

Q: Underneath what?

A: Underneath his papers in his office, to cover us. To cover us. So I said one day, "What if you will not be there?" He said, "Then Madam, then they cannot help you." But he was there. But he came, of course. Shirts and Blouses and linens. Had always something. And we gave him that; but we were there 'til the end of time. People had... We paid taxes. That's Belgium again. We paid our taxes. And when I said to the man in the tax office, I said, "We pay taxes, but you don't allow us to work. But..." He said, "Yah, money is money." The Belges, you know, they are real business people.

Q: Who is hiding your papers for you?

A: This police officer.

Q: It was a police officer that was hiding the papers. Okay.

A: But we had to pay taxes.

Q: How did you get the money to pay the taxes with?

A: To what?

Q: How did you get the money to pay the taxes with?

A: I had this business. I told you.

Q: Okay. So this is part of the business.

A: Yes. We had to pay tax from the business.

Q: Alright. What happened? You said you were there until...

A: '42.

Q: '42. What happened to make you leave?

A: Because my second husband. I would have not left, but he said "We will never be free. We'll never have permission to work. How do you want to live your whole life like this?" He had a brother and nieces in America. So they sent that affidavit. And that was '49 already.

Q: Let's go back. Let's go back to 1942. You are in Brussels. The year is '42. You have to get from Brussels... You have to get out of Brussels. What did you do?

A: Yah. We went to Switzerland.

Q: You went to Switzerland. How did you get there?

A: With the false paper, I told you that. We were arrested... Not arrested. But they stopped us--French soldiers or something--and said, "You are Jews, and you cannot go here." And I said... I speak French. I said... He said, "How do you speak French when you are Germans?," he said. I said, "We coming from Luxembourg. I speak French." So they interrogates us, and went more and more. And Gerda, she was sitting on the grass out in the cold. And she sat; and if she wanted to say something, so he gave her a [stip (ph)].

Q: He hit her. Okay.

A: Yeah. So I said, "You know, you are French." "Yes, Madam." I said, "And the French love the Jews." He said, "Yes, Madam." I said, "What do you want from us?" You know this chutzpah--this was all what I did, how we saved us. So he said, "Oh, I am afraid the [Boshes (ph)]"--he called the Germans the [Boshes (ph)]"--will keep you...will get you." I said, "Don't you worry. Can I go?" He said, "Yes." Then I turned around and said, "What do you want me to do? Go on to Switzerland, or go back to Brussels?" (Laughing) So he said, "Go on." And when we came there--I don't know how--we came to a farm, and they took us in. And then they saw to it that we got a leader, a man who brought us over the border to Belgium ...to Switzerland. So in Switzerland, we...when we came to the border, the officer...Swiss officer, said, "You cannot go in there. You have family there?" I had family there. They knew the [elders (ph)]. He left, and came back and said, "There's nobody of this

name." I said, "Don't you tell me [that]!" He left. So then, when we came over the border, this Swiss had police around us. They put us in hotel. And Gerda said, "How nice they are! They lead us!" I said, "Gerda, they don't lead us. They watch us." (Laughing) The next morning, this policeman was there again. Gerda said, "You see?" I said, "You will see." We went to the..to... (pause) to a prison. They brought us to a prison. And when we both had...the Swiss people knew exactly what happened. They said, "Pauvre gens!"--"Poor people!" "Pauvre gens!" So we went into prison. And again, they were very good to us. We came in there. We got...Gerda and I, we got the room with two beds. And we got the food. And it came to Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur. On Yom Kippur, I said to them... ____ discipline. I said, "You know, tomorrow we don't eat." They brought--I don't know what it was. At night, and then ____ brought us a soup. They [were] very nice.

Q: This was...all of this was in prison?

A: This was all in prison.

Q: OK.

A: The night before Rosh HaShanah, we were invited; and we were in a hotel in ____, I think. All Jewish people who are in prison or in these camps on Rosh HaShanah. But not for Yom Kippur. On Yom Kippur, he was very nice. Yah. And then Gerda got sick, and we were under police surveillance... association. High officer, I don't know who it was. He said, "You cannot stay in prison any longer." And he sent us to the Salvation Army. Here again, we got the beautiful room; and they were very nice to us. We helped them in the kitchen, we helped them with the laundry. And they were very nice. Of course, they came with the Bible and want to... Yeah, but very nice. And when we left for... What was it? For Basel, there was a home. So came all Jews to the train with the backpacks just filled with everything--with toothpaste, toothbrush--with everything you can think of, they brought us. Very nice, the people. So then we came to Liestal, where this was home like in... And we had it good, very good, there. We had not the best food; but we had entertainment, and people were nice, and we were not in danger. And it was... And then somebody was looking for somebody who could sew. And Gerda was able to, and she got a good place in Bern with Jewish people. And she was there, had her own room. And I didn't want to stay alone there. So I got to Bern as a housekeeper. To Professor [Belaqui (ph)]. Very, very fine people. He was...he was a Swiss, and she was a daughter from a German general. Very fine people! And they were really... I had a woman to wash. I had a woman to iron. I only had to shop and to cook. And they treated me like a queen. Very, very nice! Yah. And there we stood [NB: stayed] until we were repatriated to Belgium.

Q: This is after the war now?

A: After the war. Gerda married again. In '45, when the war was over, she married an old friend [of] her first husband. And then we came back to Belgium, and then we opened up

there a blouse...the blouse manufactory.

Q: Oh, I see. When did you meet your second husband?

A: In the camp. There was a man camp and a women camp. And we got together. In fact, Gerda's husband was in the same camp as where my husband. And [he] said, "Oh, you know, I know a very nice man. He is so lonesome. And he comes from my hometown, from Breslau." So he was director from... And there was another one, director from another business. So I said, "Oh, this man! Big ears. I don't like him. I don't want to see him." And he said, "Mrs. Blachmann,"--[as] I was then-- he's a good looking man." _____ So he introduced us. And we went. I mean, every six weeks we could go out.

Q: In the DP camp? Yeah.

A: So then...then he said later, "Would you marry me?" He was a bachelor--a 54 years old bachelor. And I said, "I will not marry you. I hope my husband is coming back. And as long as I don't know about this, I will not get married again." So he waited seven years. Then we got the paper. In '49, in Belgium, we married.

Q: That's quite a story.

A: Huh?

Q: That's quite a love, to wait for seven years.

A: Yeah. We are married 23 years.

Q: Very nice. Alright. Mrs. Stern, thank you. Thank you very much.

A: Thank you, that you take the time to do so much of [relevance (ph)].

Q: Thank you so much.

TECHNICAL CONVERSATION