

Martin and Erica's journey



Foreword

The National Union of Teachers (NUT) and the Holocaust Educational Trust (HET) are honoured to publish Dr Martin Stern's Holocaust memories, *Martin and Erica's Journey*, to coincide with Holocaust Memorial Day 2009.

The NUT has a proud history of supporting race equality and diversity through publications, campaigns and conferences. The NUT firmly supports the education of students on the importance of race equality and the lessons that can be learnt from history. It is vital that our children understand and learn from the horrors of the Holocaust.

One of the HET's earliest achievements was ensuring that the Holocaust formed part of the National Curriculum for History. HET continues to educate students, teachers and the wider public through working in schools, universities and in the community to raise awareness and understanding of the Holocaust. This is done through teacher training, outreach programmes for schools, teaching aids, resource materials and our *Lessons from Auschwitz* Projects for students.

We hope that Martin's testimony will be a source of inspiration to teachers and young people alike and will also serve as a valuable resource to teach about the Holocaust and its impact on individuals and communities. Finally we hope that Martin's testimony will help young people understand the consequences of prejudice and racism and in turn challenge all forms of discrimination.

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The Holocaust Educational Trust



This is the story of Martin and Erica Stern and the journey they were forced to make through Europe during the Second World War. It is based on Martin's memories of what happened when he was a child. Martin and Erica survived their experiences. Martin became a hospital doctor in the UK and Erica became a psychologist at a Dutch university.

Martin and Erica's journey

Often we go on journeys to visit relatives or to go on holiday. We go because we want to. But I did not choose to make my journey. I was taken from school and sent on a horrible journey. I was with my one-year-old sister, Erica, but my mum and dad were not with us. We didn't know where we were going and nobody would tell us. I did not want to go.

Our journey started in the Dutch city of Amsterdam when I was five years old and took us to Terezin, in Czechoslovakia. Here we were kept in the ghetto, a special kind of prison where people were forced to live, and were treated very badly. My sister and I were very lucky to survive because grown-ups around us did very brave things to save us.



Martin and Erica's family

My dad was born in 1911 and grew up in Berlin, Germany. He and his family were Jewish. His dad, my grandfather, jointly owned a business which made and sold ladies' coats. They were German, and considered the family to be more German than Jewish. My dad's older brother had fought in the German army during the First World War.

When Adolf Hitler became the leader of Germany in 1933 and the Nazis came to power, things changed for my family. The Nazis hated Jewish people and treated

them very badly. They even stopped Jewish people having pets! My grandparents escaped to the Netherlands, and later so did my mum and dad. When the Netherlands was invaded by the Nazis in 1940 my grandparents were sent back to Germany. They were locked up, just because they were Jewish. My father was hidden on a farm in the Netherlands and my mother stayed at home to look after me.

Martin's sister Erica is born

My mum and dad met when they lived in Germany. Because of the Nazi laws they were not allowed to marry, as my dad was Jewish and my mum was not. They escaped to the Netherlands, but the Dutch had introduced similar laws there, so they went to Belgium to marry, then returned to the Netherlands to live. That is where I was born. For the first three years of my life we lived as a family with my dad working as an architect, but Germany invaded and Jews were treated more and more badly. My dad had to go into hiding. By then my mum was pregnant with my sister Erica.

I remember the night Erica was born. My dad came to our flat and I was taken to stay with my mum and dad's friends Jo and Catherine Rademakers.



Berlin



Theresienstadt (Terezin)

Martin in danger

I did not know that I would not return to our family home, but that is what happened. Mum gave birth to Erica on 25th November 1942 and I visited them both a number of times in the hospital. Sadly my mum did not leave the hospital but died of an infection a while after Erica was born, so I had to stay with the Rademakers. They knew they risked their own lives by protecting me, but they treated me as if I was their own son.

Although the Rademakers did not like the Nazis who had taken over the Netherlands, they could not tell me this. I was so young I might say something which would betray them. This would have had terrible consequences.





Martin is arrested at school

One day in 1944, when I was five, two young Dutch men aged about 17 came into the school hall. One asked: "Is Martin Stern here?" The teacher immediately said that I had not come in that day. I could not understand why she said that. I put up my hand and said: "But I am here". As the two men led me out, I looked back. I shall never forget the ashen face of the teacher.

I was taken to a red brick building, led into an office and made to stand in front of a big desk. A man in a German Nazi uniform sat behind it. By now I was asking lots of questions. The officer gave me no explanation. He wanted to know if I was Martin Stern. I later learned he was arresting me because I was considered Jewish by the Nazi government. I was only five years old when this happened.

That's how I was captured by the Nazis.





More arrests

Whilst I was being arrested the Amsterdam police went to the Rademakers' flat and arrested Catherine, leaving her eight-month-old baby boy alone in the flat. She was released the next morning. She returned home, frantic with worry, to find that kind neighbours had heard the baby crying, broken into the flat and rescued him.

Catherine's husband Jo received a phone call at work telling him to go home urgently. Then he was arrested. Jo was also taken to the Amsterdam interrogation centre and questioned. I was in the same building.

I was led past a room with an open door where I saw Jo Rademakers and I called out to him. When I remember this, I think this was a trick. The Nazis wanted to prove I knew him to try to prove he had helped me, the son of a Jew.

How Erica was captured

After my mother died my sister, Erica, had been adopted by the Bangmas – a Dutch family who were friends of my mum and dad and who desperately wanted a daughter. Mr and Mrs Bangma were taking an incredible risk by looking after Erica. If they were caught hiding a Jewish child they would be punished. My dad was still in hiding. He could not risk looking after Erica as, if she cried, she would give away his hiding place.

On the same day I was arrested in 1944, when Erica was one and a half, the local police visited the Bangma's house and demanded Erica. Mrs Bangma created a terrible scene, throwing things at the police, whilst the 16-year-old fiancée of her son ran out of the house with Erica and hid in the garden. The police threatened what would happen if the family didn't hand Erica over, and so the next day the Bangmas took Erica from their village in their car and handed her over to the Dutch police in Amsterdam.





What happened to the families who helped Martin and Erica?

Jo Rademakers was sent to a concentration camp in the Netherlands, and then to one at Neuengamme near Hamburg in Germany. Concentration camps were like a prison, but with terrible conditions. The Nazis put people they considered their enemies there. Life was made deliberately hard for people and they were treated as slaves. They usually had little food and many people became horribly ill and died. Jo died too. Of course there was no funeral. All Catherine got back were his glasses.

The Bangma family, who had looked after Erica and were involved in resisting the Nazis, had to go into hiding. They escaped arrest on several occasions, but to do this they lived in terrible conditions.



Westerbork transit camp

My sister and I were sent to Westerbork transit camp. Westerbork was a transit prison camp. It was a miserable place. We knew we would be shot if we went near the barbed wire. The food was terrible. I remember vegetables so bad that they would be thrown out today. The worst food was nicknamed 'barbed wire'. It was bundles of old French beans, sliced up without removing the woody thread! It was painful to eat.

Erica and I didn't live together. I was in a hut for little boys without parents and my sister Erica was in part of a hut for babies. The huts were terribly overcrowded, with up to 800 people in each one. People slept in three-tier wooden bunks.

Westerbork's terrible secret

Every week I watched trains of cattle trucks being packed with people I knew from the Westerbork camp. When the train wagons were crammed full the doors were locked shut with steel wire. As the trains slowly moved out of the camp, an armed soldier stood on a platform at the end of each train wagon as the people squashed inside tried to look out through the two small openings in the side.

On the sides of the trains were boards naming where the trains were going. The Nazi soldiers supervising the trains looked like normal human beings, but they were involved in a terrible crime. I couldn't understand how one group of people could do this to another.





Sent on another journey

One day, in August 1944, I was put on a train. It was a passenger train, but still packed with people. Opposite me was a woman with what looked like a baby on her lap. She told me this was my sister! Erica, who was not quite two, was wrapped in a beautiful white crocheted baby shawl. I worried she would get cold because of the holes in the pattern.

The train stopped at a big railway station in Germany. We were herded into a hall and could see German people catching trains and greeting relatives. They saw us huddled on the floor but took no notice.

Then we were packed into a different train made up of cattle trucks. There was no room to sit down, and there was a bucket for everyone to use as a toilet. The train travelled for several days and nights. We had no food or water. I remember asking why an old man was sleeping with his eyes open. I had never seen a dead person before.



Arrival at the Theresienstadt ghetto

Finally the train stopped and the door was lowered. We were inside a town and next to a large building. It looked as though we had come into a fortress as I could see part of a huge earth bank or rampart on the edge of the town. On top of the earth rampart was a solid fence. The sky was blue with a few small clouds. I wanted to run up the rampart to see if I could look through the gaps, but other people who were there shouted at me that I would be shot if I did.

We were in a Czech town called Terezin, which the Nazis now called Theresienstadt. The Nazis had forced the town's people to leave and were now using it as a horribly overcrowded prison for thousands of Jewish people. Conditions were terrible and, without being able to leave, many people also suffered and died here. Most were taken to other camps and killed.



Living in the ghetto

After I left the train I was put into a group of boys of about my age. I had no idea where my sister was and am sorry to say I probably did not think about her. I pleaded for food but was told there wasn't any. I kept asking. Eventually a boy of about eight took me to a room with a small iron stove and made me a tiny bit of porridge. I hadn't eaten for so long. That particular spoonful of porridge is the most memorable meal I have had in my life.

I don't know how long I was with the boys but eventually, probably later on, on the day I arrived, a Dutch woman took me out of the group. I did not know her, but she took me to the place where she slept. It had been a shop, but everything except the walls, floor, ceiling, shop windows and doors had been removed. Women slept on the floor shoulder to shoulder, and amazingly there was my baby sister!

Saved by a kind stranger

The woman's name was Mrs de Jong. She had collected Erica from one building, a place for babies and toddlers, and then picked me from about 50 little boys in a different building. I later learned that Mrs de Jong had asked the Jewish council, or Judenrat, in the ghetto if she could adopt some Jewish children. She was told that on the next train would be two Dutch children that she could take care of – me and Erica.

Mrs de Jong was Dutch and a Christian who had married a Jewish man. Because of this she was imprisoned in Theresienstadt. She worked in the kitchen in the ghetto and brought me and Erica hot food, even though this was dangerous. We lived with her in a number of women's dormitories, where we were packed in. I would spend the day in the dormitory or sometimes I would wander the streets of Theresienstadt.





Theresienstadt is liberated and the war ends

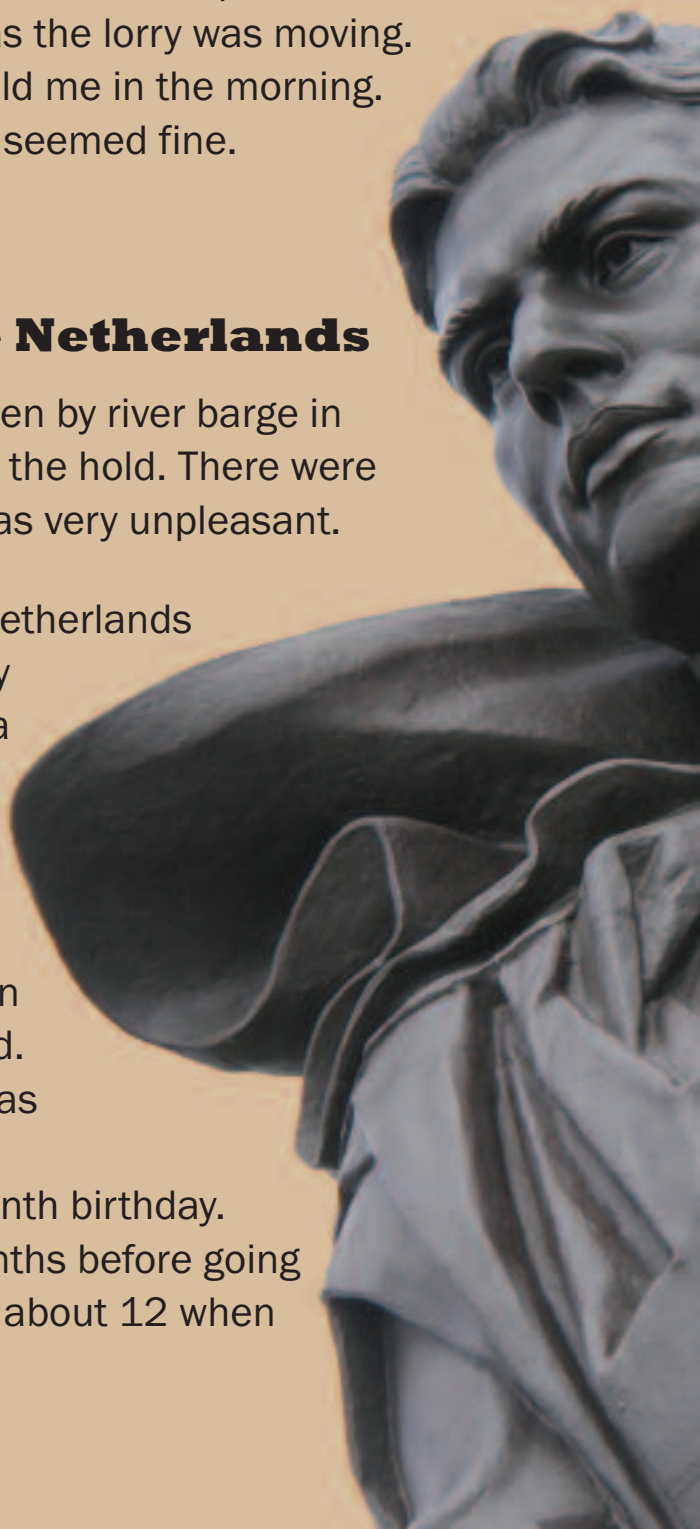
One morning in May 1945 Mrs de Jong woke me up and told me that the Russian Army had liberated the ghetto. We were no longer prisoners! I remember being disappointed that Mrs de Jong did not wake me up when the soldiers arrived. I wanted to see them. She did, though, give me a broken compass that one of the soldiers had given her for me.

The war was ending across Europe. But life in the ghetto didn't change much. Eventually we journeyed back to the Netherlands in big army lorries. I was in the back and Mrs de Jong sat in the driver's cab as she had two-year-old Erica with her. The lorries travelled day and night. During the night Mrs de Jong fell asleep against the door, which flew open. Little Erica tumbled off her lap on to the road as the lorry was moving. I only heard about it when Mrs de Jong told me in the morning. Erica had just a few minor scratches and seemed fine.

The children return to the Netherlands

We completed the journey by train and then by river barge in the bottom section of the boat, known as the hold. There were no windows and, in the heat of June, it was very unpleasant.

When we arrived at the quayside in the Netherlands the Bangmas were there to meet us. They had found out we were coming because a friend who worked for the Red Cross had seen our names on a list. Mrs de Jong persuaded them to let us go home with her. We stayed at her flat in Amsterdam, but the next day the Bangmas came again and took Erica and me to where they lived. The Bangmas didn't keep me though. I was sent once more to live with Catherine Rademakers, around the time of my seventh birthday. I only stayed with Catherine for a few months before going to live with the Bangma family until I was about 12 when Mrs Bangma died suddenly.





My Dad and how we came to England

I am sure you are wondering what happened to my dad and how I came to England. I found out after the war that dad had been arrested after his hiding place had been given away by a local postman. He was sent to Westerbork, probably around the time Erica and I were there. He was then sent on a train to Auschwitz-Birkenau, a terrible camp in Poland which very few people survived. From there he was sent to yet another camp in Germany called Buchenwald. He died there on 25th March 1945.

You may remember our grandmother from the beginning of our story. She too spent much of the war in a camp, but managed to survive and after the war she came to England. My dad's sister, my aunt, had escaped to England before the war and had settled in Manchester, where she married my uncle.

After Mrs Bangma died it was decided that Erica and I should move to Manchester to live with our relatives.



Martin's mother and father



Martin and Erica



Martin's maternal grandparents



Rebuilding life

It was not easy, starting again in a new country with people we did not know and a language we did not understand.

I remember starting school in England and how difficult it was to understand the language. Even worse were the French lessons. I could already understand French, but my teacher's pronunciation was so bad I could not tell if she was speaking English or French! That was at the first school I attended.

Later I went to Manchester Grammar School and then on to Oxford University where I studied medicine and later became a doctor. I also got married and had three children of my own, who now have their own families and I am a proud grandfather!

Erica went to university too and studied German before becoming a teacher back in the Netherlands at the University of Utrecht. She married, but did not have any children. Erica died in 2007.



Holocaust Memorial, Berlin, Germany

A better future

You may be wondering why I wanted to tell you about my life, when all these things happened so long ago. I am

retired now, but spend a lot of my time

telling my story to young people like you. Sadly we live in a world where people still do terrible things to others and use such excuses as the colour of a person's skin or their religion. I hope that after hearing my story you might think about what you can learn from it and how you can help the world to be a better place in the future.



The memorial at Terezin, Czech Republic

Martin was born in the Netherlands in 1938 to German parents who had been forced to leave Nazi Germany because his Dad was Jewish. His sister, Erica, was born in 1942 and this is the story of what happened to Martin and Erica.



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