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HEDDA STERNE: Passport to Safety | April 6, 2016

In October 1941, Hedda Sterne arrived in New York as a World War II refugee. The artist rarely discussed details of her journey, but occasionally reflected that she had only narrowly escaped her native Romania in the face of Nazi persecution. When The Hedda Sterne Foundation began processing the artist's archives in 2015, Sterne's 1941 passport offered a first detailed glimpse into this largely unknown chapter of her biography.



Issued to Hedwig Stern—her given first and married last names—stamps in six languages offer a definitive timeline for her journey: in June, 1941 she received a U.S. visa from the American Embassy in Bucharest, followed, in July, by permission to depart via Lisbon, one of the last open ports in Europe. With these permissions in hand, she progressively acquired visas from embassies of countries between Romania and Portugal to ensure her passage: Spain (stamped July 31), Germany (September 30), and Hungary (October 3). Then she began series of flights to Lisbon, from Arad, Romania, through Vienna, Munich, Barcelona, and Madrid, landing at Sintra Airbase on October 8. Sterne ultimately departed aboard the *S.S. Excambion* on October 17 for New York.

Sterne's orderly passport, which only accounts for a single year, may portray her journey as seamless, yet it is striking to note that every stamp likely took an incredible effort to acquire.

Renewed and even unused visas—a stamp for travel to Paraguay, for instance—additionally underscore her desperation to seek safe haven outside of Europe.

While this dense document offers many details about Sterne’s journey to the U.S., it simultaneously raises questions about her emigration. Given that every refugee’s story is one of extraordinary endurance, was Hedda Sterne’s voyage particularly extraordinary? How did she acquire a coveted U.S. “Quota Immigrant” visa? How did she gain access to air-travel across Europe instead of the more typical passage by train? And as a Jewish avant-garde artist, how did she gain permission to travel through German territory? Was she lucky, well connected, or both?



