Hedda Sterne's Photomontages: Passport to Life

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1 Hedda Sterne (1910–2011), a Romanian-born American artist, is perhaps most widely recognized today as the sole woman in the now-iconic photograph known as "the Irascibles" (Fig. 1).[1] Taken for *Life* magazine's **January 15, 1951** issue, the image accompanied a story about a group of New York artists—Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, Robert Motherwell, among them—who had signed a protest letter condemning the Metropolitan Museum of Art for excluding modernist painters from its forthcoming exhibition *American Painting Today*.[2] While the photograph has come to symbolize a pivotal moment in American art history, it tethered Sterne to a narrative she never fully embraced. In a 1981 interview with Phyllis Tuchman, Sterne reflected, "In terms of career, it's probably the worst thing that happened to me."[3] The mythic stature of the men she stood beside—and the photograph's enduring legacy—has too often overshadowed the complexity and breadth of her own artistic practice.

Fig. 1 Nina Leen, *Group Portrait of the Irascibles,* 1950. Photograph. The LIFE Picture Collection. Licensed for editorial use via Shutterstock Editorial, Image ID: 12537736b. Front row: Theodoros Stamos, Jimmy Ernst, Barnett Newman, James Brooks, Mark Rothko; middle row: Richard Pousette-Dart, William Baziotes, Jackson Pollock, Clyfford Still, Robert Motherwell, Bradley Walker Tomlin; back row: Willem de Kooning, Adolph Gottlieb, Ad Reinhardt, Hedda Sterne

2 Sterne has described herself as an "optic instrument," a perceptive witness keenly attuned to the shifting visual, material, and cultural currents of the twentieth century—

its technologies, structures, and crises.[4] She refused to align with any one movement or style, choosing instead to pursue a body of work that resists easy classification. Her art reflects a lifetime of looking and seeing—but also of reading and thinking. A voracious reader with a deep interest in philosophy, Sterne absorbed ideas as readily as images, filtering both through a visual language that remained fluid, analytical, and exploratory throughout her life. This practice of close observation—of words, images, and environments—defined her approach to artmaking across media.

3 Though far less known than the 1951 photograph, Sterne's earliest connection to *Life* magazine came a decade earlier, through a series of photomontages she assembled from its pages.[5] Her engagement with *Life* magazine was not incidental: it was both a record of American culture and a material she repurposed to understand—and reflect upon—her new environment. These little-known works offer a revealing lens on her engagement with modernism and her evolving identity as an American.

4 That story begins in the fall of 1941 when, in her early thirties, Sterne fled Bucharest for New York. Romania had aligned with the Axis powers and, as a Jewish woman, she narrowly escaped the horrors of the Bucharest pogrom. She passed through Austria, Germany, Spain, and Portugal before she finally crossed the Atlantic. This migration—largely undocumented in her own words—can be traced through her Romanian passport: an evocative collage of stamps, signatures, and official markings that register the trauma and complexity of Holocaust-era displacement.

5 Shortly after her arrival in New York, Sterne began creating a series of five photomontages using clippings from *Life* magazine issues published in the months before Pearl Harbor (some dating prior to her arrival in New York). Though she had previously experimented with collage and photomontage in Surrealist circles in Bucharest and Paris—creating automatic torn-paper compositions and dreamlike assemblages probing the subconscious—these works marked a departure. While she retained the cut-and-paste logic of her earlier practice, her gaze turned outward. The *Life* photomontages juxtapose images of American normalcy—a baseball pitcher's arm mid-throw, the glow of a pep rally bonfire—with clippings from articles reporting on wartime developments. The result is a layered visual language—personal, dissonant, and historically situated: a reflection of both the world she had fled and the unfamiliar one she had entered.

6 These works, which Sterne never exhibited and once considered destroying, offer a rare glimpse into a private process of reckoning. As Edward Said writes in *Reflections on Exile*, the experience of displacement is inherently contrapuntal: "habits of life, expression, or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment."[6] Sterne's photomontages give visual form to this dual consciousness.

7 Together, the photomontages and passport function not only as biographical documents, but as rich material artifacts—inviting a mode of analysis that bridges conservation, art

history, and cultural memory. This essay takes up that invitation, examining Sterne's 1941 passport and photomontages as parallel expressions of identity and culture—documents that narrate her experience as a refugee through the ephemeral, everyday materials that defined both émigré life and the American wartime ethos. Through this lens, I consider the role that paper, as both a bureaucratic and artistic medium, played in Sterne's life and creative practice. This approach also reflects my philosophy of paper conservation: a practice that combines technical study with historical and biographical analysis to interrogate the boundaries between art and material culture.

Paper, Borders, and Bureaucracy: The Cultural Weight of Documents

8 At the beginning of the twentieth century, passports began to resemble the booklets we use today. The League of Nations's 1920 Conference on Passports and Customs Formalities aimed to standardize their format and content, solidifying the passport's status as a global symbol of identity and legal rights and, at the same time, its function as an instrument of national security and surveillance.

9 In his 1940 work Refugee Conversations, playwright and poet Bertolt Brecht reflected on the almost absurd power of these documents: "The passport is the noblest part of a human being . . . A human can come about anywhere, in the most irresponsible manner and with no proper reason at all, but not a passport. That's why a passport will always be honoured . . . whereas a person can be as good as you like, and still no one takes any notice."[7] Brecht's quip distills a truth that remains salient: in the modern world, identity documents can carry more power than the individuals they represent, shaping how a person's worth is perceived.

10 Sociologist John Torpey expands on this idea, noting that modern states "play a crucial role in generating and sustaining their 'embrace' of individuals and . . . use this embrace to expropriate the legitimate 'means of movement.'" [8] The ability to move freely—or at all—became dependent on state-sanctioned paper.

11 During World War II, passports embodied both prejudice and protection. They marked not just national borders, but the edges of survival. The Nazis, for instance, marked the passports of German Jews with the letter J, effectively branding them as targets and restricting their ability to flee. For many, the only path forward was to produce skilled, authentic-looking forgeries.[9] Fabricating "papers" thus became a lifeline, a matter of life and death. Clandestine operations—such as those by the Ładoś Group, a collaboration between Polish diplomats and Jewish activists at the Polish embassy in Bern, Switzerland, who successfully distributed around 10,000 forged Latin American passports—offered vital lifelines.[10] So too, did Adolfo Kaminsky, a forger affiliated with a French resistance group known as "the 6th," who utilized his chemistry and typesetting skills to produce false documents for both Jews and resistance fighters.[11]

12 Passports, then, marked not only where one had been but where one was permitted—or denied—access. At one level they document official narratives: physical descriptions, citizenship, and border crossings. More subtley, they also bear traces of performance: the interactions between bearers and border officials, of the negotiations and anxieties of those seeking refuge. As cultural anthropologist Mahmoud Keshavarz has observed, "the stamping of pages transforms the blank passport into a book, an archive with stories of crossing, of being validated or invalidated by various states and actors."[12] In this way, passports become unintended autobiographies—narrated through stamps, signatures, and dates. It is no wonder people preserve these booklets well beyond their expiration dates.

13 As a paper conservator, I find passports fascinating not only for their technical complexity—their embossed seals, security features, and layered construction—which make them a challenge to analyze, but also for their narrative power. These modest booklets carry enormous weight. Unlike most possessions, these papers are required, not chosen, and in moments of displacement, they come to represent both identity and stories of survival. The directive "papers, please" echoes through history, reminding us how personhood has been mediated through paper. A passport's worn folds, torn edges, and fading inks speak not just to their era's material technologies but to the lived experiences of their holders.

14 This was what drew me to the 1941 passport that artist Hedda Sterne used to escape Romania during WWII, which is in the collection of the **Hedda Sterne Foundation.** Sterne rarely spoke about her journey from Romania to New York, so her passport is critical to reconstructing that period of her life.

15 I came to appreciate identity documents intimately during my time as Head Conservator at the 9/11 Memorial & Museum. Among the wreckage of the Twin Towers were laminated workplace IDs, driver's licenses, and passports, objects small in scale yet deeply personal. These documents told the stories not only of victims and survivors, but also the lives they led before the attacks: where they worked, where they lived, and what they carried with them. Their mangled and burned forms testify to the violence they passed through, capturing the scale of loss in ways that even more dramatic images of collapse and fire cannot.

16 Together, these forms of identification remind us of the individual within sweeping histories and of how the past is shaped not only by what is lost but also by the things that survive.

The Material and Symbolic Significance of Hedda Sterne's Passport

17 Each step of Sterne's escape from Europe was inscribed in her 1941 Romanian passport. Issued to Hedwig Stern, the passport's second page—which would have contained identifying information, like birthplace and physical characteristics—appears to have

been torn out. Though the reason for this excision remains a mystery, it perhaps reflects a desire on Sterne's part to reinvent herself upon her arrival in the United States (Fig. 2).

18 Leaving Europe during WWII was a logistical ordeal. Travel required more than just a passport—it required obtaining a constellation of permissions: police certificates, exit and transit permissions, and a financial affidavit. Choreographing their alignment was equally complex, as many elements had expiration dates. The United States visa, issued on October 13, 1941, the golden ticket in Sterne's protracted journey, was the most elusive piece of this puzzle, its terms dictating the narrow timeframe within which everything had to converge (Fig. 3).

Fig. 2 Hedda Sterne's 1941 Passport, inside cover and page 3. Courtesy of the Hedda Sterne Foundation.

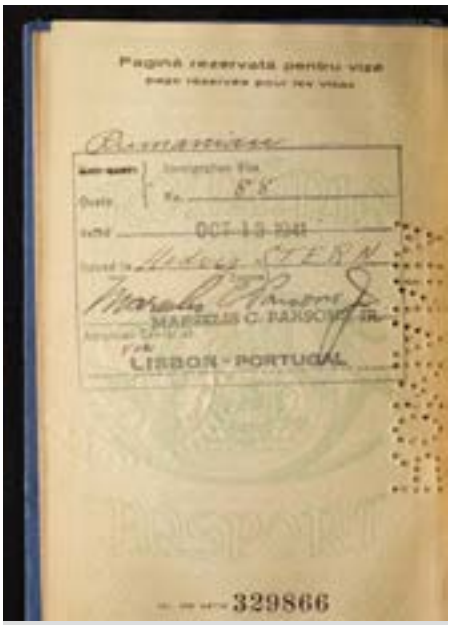

Fig. 3 Hedda Sterne's 1941 Passport, American Visa, page 16. Courtesy of the Hedda Sterne Foundation.inside cover and page 3. Courtesy of the Hedda Sterne Foundation.

19 Sterne was reticent when it came to discussing her journey from Bucharest to the United States. Her first husband, financier Fritz Sterne—who she married in 1932— entered the United States on a business visa in June 1940. Although they were separated at the time, Hedda acknowledged that he was instrumental in facilitating her flight: "[H] e was an extraordinary, true, loyal friend," she said, and she "never had economic problems because of him."[13] She further explained, "he brought me over [in 1941] with tremendous efforts."[14] Upon her arrival in the United States, Fritz changed their surname to Stafford; Sterne later returned to a slight variation of the name under which she had exhibited in Europe: Hedda Sterne (adding a "d" to her first name and an "e" to the end of her last name). According to scholar Sarah Eckhardt, Fritz was able to obtain Hedda's United States visa from Cordell Hull, who was, at the time, the Secretary of State.[15]

20 Sterne's passport helps fill in the rest of this story. According to careful cursive inscriptions, it was issued on November 28, 1940, and was valid for one year. The inside cover features a black-and-white photograph of Sterne, fastened to the book with metal grommets. She is smartly dressed, wearing a white blouse with a ruffled collar. The photograph is signed, in green ink, Hedwig Stern.

21 The passport is also a rich material object. An intricately folded and glued structure, it includes 28 interior pages attached to the cover by two printed pastedowns. A specialized layout, or imposition, was employed for the single-sided printing of the pages. The paper was folded and arranged in a complex manner, leading to a unique fan-like effect upon opening, in part attributable to certain folded edges being left uncut. This distinctive effect may have served as a security measure intended to ensure authenticity and deter forgery.

22 Each page of the passport bears a printed engraving of the Romanian coat of arms (Fig. 4).[16] This printing technique, notable for its raised ink, produces a tactile experience that would have aided in authentication. It was also common practice at that time for countries to perforate passports across their entire thickness to deter page replacement; perforations near the spine of Sterne's passport spell "Romania."

Fig. 4 Hedda Sterne's 1941 Passport, pages 10–11, ultraviolet-reflected image. Courtesy of the Hedda Sterne Foundation.

23 The interior is a visual narrative told through a collage of stamps, signatures, dates, and notations in various languages, tracing Sterne's journey from Bucharest to Lisbon, Portugal, one of the few remaining open European ports, where she would board a ship for the United States. Beginning in the summer of 1941, Sterne obtained the necessary visas (from Spain, Portugal, Hungary, and Germany) to travel from Romania to Lisbon, and, from there, on to New York. A note in cursive handwriting, made on the eleventh page of the passport, indicates that, on September 30, Sterne obtained permission from the German embassy to fly through Germany en route to New York. On an earlier page, a notation and accompanying stamp, both made on October 3 in blue ink, establish that the Director General of Police had approved Sterne's departure. That Sterne took planes, rather than trains, from Romania to Lisbon, and was able to travel through Germany despite being an avant-garde artist, suggests a certain level of financial and political wherewithal—presumably a reflection of the "tremendous efforts" her husband Fritz made to bring Sterne to New York.

24 Sterne's passport doesn't just recount her actual journey; it also reveals other options ultimately not pursued. Its sixth page contains a visa issued by the Paraguayan Consulate in Bucharest, in February 1941, which hints at Sterne's possible consideration of immigration to South America, a path pursued by many Jews during that era.

25 According to two stamps on the thirteenth page of Sterne's passport, one purple and one blue, her journey began on October 6, when she flew from the Arad airport in western Romania to Vienna.[17] She proceeded through Germany, flying to Munich, then to Barcelona, and then to Madrid. On October 8, Sterne flew from Madrid to the Sintra airport, near Lisbon. On October 11, she was vaccinated against smallpox by a doctor

Fig. 5 Passenger manifest for S.S. Excambion, October 17, 1941. National Archives microfilm publication T715, roll approximately 6586 (Passenger and Crew Lists of Vessels Arriving at New York, 1897–1957). Digital image accessed via the Statue of Liberty–Ellis Island Foundation Passenger Records database (Passenger ID: 901753673404; Frame: 692; Line: 17). Public domain.

employed by the American Export Lines medical department, and on the 17th, the *S.S. Excambion* set sale for New York with Sterne aboard, as indicated by the ship's manifest (Fig. 5).

26 While the passport served its intended bureaucratic function without question, its deeper significance lies in the layers of meaning it reveals, amplifying the emotional and political stakes of her journey.[18] As an object, it attests to the life-altering power ofpaper during World War II—how bureaucracy, identity, and survival converged in the folds of a booklet. It is also an artifact of exile—a collage and diary of Sterne's refugee experience. It preserves the narrative of the life and conflict from which she fled; reflects the fragmented reality of her time as well as her ability to reconstruct a new official identity; and lends context to the artwork she would create upon her arrival in the U.S.

27 Although Sterne rarely spoke about her Jewish identity after immigrating to the United States, her passport records how that identity was externally imposed. In 1941—in contrast to today—religious and ethnic identity was mediated less by self-definition than by legal classification and social exclusion; it was something assigned, not chosen. As she once remarked, "Until I came to the United States . . . I immediately made sure . . . that [people] knew that I'm a Jew," a preemptive act shaped by the realities of antisemitism.[19] Following her immigration, the absence of similar expression may reflect not only her secularism, but also a deeply ingrained survival strategy. The passport registers this tension: it identifies her, moves her—but does not fully reveal her.

Art in Exile: Sterne's Journey Reflected in Her Photomontage

28 Like many refugees, Sterne navigated a labyrinth of quotas and red tape—what historian David Wyman famously described as "paper walls."[20] For Sterne, however, these paper obstacles would become more than mechanisms of survival: they would emerge as the conceptual foundations for her artistic practice. After arriving safely in New York, Sterne settled into an apartment at 410 East 50th Street and turned to photomontage—a medium well suited to negotiating the fragmentation of exile and her identity in a new cultural context.[21] In five works created between 1941 and 1942, she juxtaposed images depicting regular American life and institutions with clippings from articles reporting on alarming war-time developments.[22] By reconfigurating and recontextualizating *Life* magazine imagery, Sterne invoked themes of home, emergency, terror, and displacement—effectively picking up the narrative where the passport left off (Fig. 6).[23] In this light, the photomontages become more than compositional studies, but acts of visual testimony composed from elements of print culture and personal memory. As Sterne herself remarked, "[T]he game [of making art] is complicated because nothing can be used as it is found. Chaotic emotion first evolves into lyrical intuition, to be then transcribed into clearly outlined shapes—elements of truth—that could not otherwise be stated."[24]

29 A few years earlier, in 1936, Henry Luce, the head of Time, Inc., had charted a new course for *Life* magazine, endeavoring to establish it as "The Show-Book of the World." Tapping into the narrative potency of photographs, *Life* leveraged visual storytelling to cover national and international news. Luce wanted *Life* to create the definitive historical record of its era. He hoped that a century later, historians would consult *Life's* rich visual archive rather than "fumbling through dozens of newspapers and magazines." By 1939, *Life* boasted a circulation of more than two million, with an actual pass-along readership that may have reached nearly a quarter of the U.S. population. Despite its cultural reach and documentary ambition, *Life* often presented a censored or simplified view of global conflict, shaped by its commercial imperatives and reliance on advertising.[25] For instance, a 1941 headline such as "The Tidy Dutch Clean Up the Mess of Rotterdam" reveals a sanitized framing of Nazi destruction—which likely struck Sterne, newly arrived from war-torn Europe, as disturbingly glib. This critique is conveyed in one of her photomontages (Fig. 7), in which she reworks the image used in that article from *Life's* **December 1, 1941** issue, which featured an aerial photograph of Rotterdam under the aforementioned headline. Into this carefully composed image of order and recovery, Sterne introduces two painted and collaged female figures—clipped from *Life's* **September 29, 1941** issue, from an article on first aid. Reflecting on World War II, Sterne recalled being "very impressed by aerial photographs, [which were] [v]ery unbelievably distant. And how all this death became just patterns . . . aerial photographs of bombed places."[26] Far from reinforcing the magazine's optimistic tone, Sterne's composition calls attention to the psychological and human cost of war, exposing the dissonance between media representations and lived experience.

Fig. 6 Hedda Sterne, Untitled (no. 1403), 1941, photomontage. © The Hedda Sterne Foundation, Inc. | Licensed by ARS, New York, NY.

Fig. 7 Hedda Sterne, Untitled (no. 0259), 1941, photomontage. © The Hedda Sterne Foundation, Inc. | Licensed by ARS, New York, NY.

30 This intervention exemplifies a broader strategy in Sterne's photomontages: by cutting and reassembling *Life's* pages, she fractures its visual logic and disrupts its editorial voice. The physical act of recomposing—using everyday materials—magazine pages, construction-type paper (reminiscent of photographic albums), rubber cement, and modest touches of pen and paint—lays bare the contradictions embedded within even the most recognizable imagery. Her collages juxtapose war-torn Europe with images of Americans preparing for conflict or indulging in everyday pastimes—such as college football rallies or baseball games—that likely seemed, to a European Jewish refugee, surreal or estranged. In this context, printed matter and cheap paper do not merely depict exile—they enact it.

31 The performative aspect of Sterne's photomontages resonates with art historian Erika Doss's observations on how readers engage with magazines: in fragments, often out of sequence, and outside a linear narrative. As Doss has pointed out, we "flip" through magazines, "looking at them in bits and pieces, backward and forward." She argues that this mode of reading reflects how popular magazines are often organized: "as jumbled assemblages of images, texts, features, and advertisements whose miscellaneous graphics, words, and intended effects are intermingled and often intentionally inseparable."[27] Sterne's photomontages coalesce this disjointed reading experience, drawing attention to the ways American identity, visual culture, and collective memory were being shaped in the lead-up to Pearl Harbor.

32 For Sterne, photomontage seems to have been a medium through which she could try to reconcile the contradictory nature of exile, enabling her to begin to piece together a new identity from the paper fragments of popular culture. Her *Life* photomontages are distinguished by a restrained color scheme—black, white, blue, yellow, red, and gray—and her reserved yet dynamic use of line, in pen, paint, and fabricated chalk, applied both before and after affixing the collage elements. Preserving the scale of the original magazine, each composition layers stories from the source photographs, their reproduction in half-tone, and Sterne's creative transformation of those photomechanical prints. The contrast between the offset prints and the drawn elements is central to her method, exposing both the constructed nature of media imagery and the fragile materiality of its form.[28]

Fig. 8 Hedda Sterne, Untitled (no. 1402), 1941, photomontage. © The Hedda Sterne Foundation, Inc. | Licensed by ARS, New York, NY.

33 A collage that exemplifies this strategy features clippings from two issues of *Life*, **September 15, 1941**, and **November 10, 1941** (Fig. 8). The central image is a black-and-white photograph of St. John's Church in Richmond, Virginia, where Patrick Henry, in 1775, famously exclaimed, "Give me liberty, or give me death!" The image was featured in an article that included photographs of other iconic American locations—Plymouth Rock, Lexington Common (Massachusetts), Independence Square (Philadelphia), Harper's Ferry (Virginia), and so on. It warned that, in the present atmosphere of "gathering gloom, many a troubled American mind [had] brooded over the things and the people that had made this country what it is today." Beneath the picture of St. John's Church, the story includes some of Patrick Henry's famous speech: "Gentlemen may cry, Peace, peace, peace—but there is no peace. The war is actually begun . . ."[29]

34 Sterne complicates this nostalgic framing by superimposing new visual elements. Above the iconic church's door, Sterne placed a large disembodied eye taken from a story on hypnotism, titled, "Hypnotism: It is Having New Vogue as Stunt and as Science," from the November 10, 1941 issue of *Life* (Fig. 9).[30] Smoke—clipped from a story about a six-hour siege on the British aircraft carrier *Illustrious* by Axis bombers—is billowing from the church's front door. Extending from the smoke plume is a picture of the arm

Fig. 9 Pages 104 and 77 from *LIFE*, vol. 11, no. 19 (November 10, 1941). Reproduced under fair use for scholarly analysis of Hedda Sterne's appropriation and transformation of mass-media imagery in her collage practice. Source: The LIFE Picture Collection.

Fig. 10 Pages 31 and 87 from *LIFE*, vol. 11, no. 11 (September 15, 1941). Reproduced under fair use for scholarly analysis of Hedda Sterne's appropriation and transformation of mass-media imagery in her collage practice. Source: The LIFE Picture Collection.

of New York Giants pitcher Carl Hubbell throwing a screw-ball, taken from an article about him in the September 15, 1941 issue of *Life* (Fig. 10).[31] The result is a surreal visual constellation in which patriotic iconography, American pastimes, and wartime imagery collide. The church, a national symbol of liberty, is recast as a site of anxiety and spectacle.

35 In another of the collages, the predominant image depicting the lights of naval ships in the background harbor is taken from the **November 24, 1941** *Life* article "Atlantic War Makes Portland, Maine, a City of Rumors and Waiting Wives" (Fig. 11).[32] In a surrealist flourish, perched above the harbor is an almost Godzilla-like giraffe, whose photograph was included in a playful article called "Rhinoceros Parents Make History as Baby Boom Hits Chicago's Brookfield Zoo," in the **November 3, 1941** issue of *Life*.[33] While the giraffe's placement initially appears whimsical, its exaggerated scale and displacement suggest a deeper symbolic resonance. As a non-native figure looming over an American coastal city, the animal becomes an unlikely emblem of dislocation.

36 Sterne, however, must have been interested in more than just the article's photographs. The article explained that "[m]ore than other Americans, [Portland's citizens] have some knowledge of the fierce struggle the Navy is waging with German raiders and submarines." This was because Portland's harbor had become one of the northeastern bases for the Atlantic fleet, and, consequently, the city had become "a town of waiting women." Hundreds of sailors' wives had moved to Portland from places like Norfolk,

Fig. 11 Hedda Sterne, Untitled (no. 0260), 1941, photomontage. © The Hedda Sterne Foundation, Inc. | Licensed by ARS, New York, NY. Minor edge losses digitally filled.

Fig. 12 Hedda Sterne, Untitled (no. 0261), 1941, photomontage. © The Hedda Sterne Foundation, Inc. | Licensed by ARS, New York, NY. Minor edge losses digitally filled.

Boston, and Newport, to be with their husbands when they returned from sea. While they waited, they walked through the city or went to movies or "meetings." The monotony, coupled with anxiety, led to what the article described as "nervous breakdowns and miscarriages."[34] Sterne, in a sort of exile herself, likely sympathized with these women—unmoored from home, suspended in uncertainty.

37 A final collage draws heavily from the **November 10, 1941,** article "*Life* Goes to a Football Pep Rally," which features a pep rally at Northwestern University, where a raucous crowd is depicted around a bonfire held the night before the football team faced its rival Michigan (Fig. 12).[35] Sterne may have found this uniquely American sporting tradition odd—or even frighteningly reminiscent of the crowd strategies of right-wing populist uprisings in Europe.

38 Although the rally was depicted in the magazine as a celebratory event, the image of a crowd around a huge bonfire, when used in Sterne's collage, becomes ominous. Particularly since, over the crowd and flames, Sterne superimposed a photograph of a young girl, looking away, with her right arm outstretched, which Sterne clipped from an advertisement for the Prudential Insurance Company in the **November 24, 1941** issue of *Life*.[36] The ad's narrative tells of a woman forced back into the workforce as a teacher after her husband's death. Extending from the young girl's head is a photograph of a hand, with its fingers extended—the only color element in the collage, which Sterne

embellished with black pen. The impression is clear: whatever innocence was left in America at that moment was about to be harshly revoked.

39 Taken together, these photomontages construct a nonlinear yet coherent account of Sterne's relocation to the United States. Rich with references to political events and popular culture, they articulate her evolving sense of self in the context of displacement and adaptation. This interaction resonates with contemporary understandings of collage as a psychotherapeutic practice—one that enables not only personal expression but also psychological and creative transformation.[37] Assembled from the ephemera of her new surroundings, these works function as symbolic gestures of a fractured identity. Collecting, sorting, and affixing materials became, in effect, a tangible experiment with her psyche, an externalized mapping of internal experience. In this way, her photomontages operate as visual surrogates for memory, capturing the emotional contours of her transition to American life. Reflecting on her arrival in New York, Sterne later recalled being "in a horrible condition," plagued by guilt, loss, and uncertainty: "It was my very great luck that I was involved in the arts . . . If I had been somebody who's not always interested . . . probably I couldn't have survived."[38]

40 Such acts of artistic assembly resonate with theories of trauma and testimony. Psychoanalyst Dori Laub, one of the founders of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, describes the urge to testify as not merely a historical obligation but instinctual: "There's an urgency to deal with the experience, to shape it, to make it happen, and it's like something is born."[39] For Laub, storytelling is not just about historical preservation—but a vital component of enduring survival itself. Viewed in this light, Sterne's *Life* magazine photomontages transcend artistic expression. They are acts of witness—emotional, personal, and historically grounded—crafted from the very ephemera of her new American life.

41 Moreover, these works anticipate postwar artistic strategies that used everyday materials to interrogate identity, memory, and the structures of representation. A relevant point of connection is ***The Passport*** by Saul Steinberg, also a Jewish refugee, and later Sterne's husband—who layered hand-drawn imagery, text, and stamped bureaucratic forms to mimic the visual language of official documents. While Steinberg's project offers an overt satire of the systems that define and authorize identity, Sterne's photomontages convey the internalized dissonance of exile—emotional, quiet, and attuned to the politics of visual culture. In both cases, paper becomes not just a surface for mark-making: it is a medium of testimony, resistance, and the bearing of history.

42 As Sterne once observed, painting allowed her to think "just like Leonardo [da Vinci] explains his thinking through drawing."[40] Her photomontages, too, are a form of thinking on paper. They demonstrate how even the most ordinary materials—magazine pages, adhesive, and pen—can carry the weight of dislocation and historical rupture. In this way, her work continues to speak across decades, inviting us to see what life was like then, but also how its meanings continue to unfold—especially in our present, also shaped by forced migration, media spectacle, and the bureaucratic regulation of identity.[41]

Conclusion

43 Perhaps someday soon, passports as we know them will be entirely obsolete. An article published in the *New York Times* last year reported on the growing use of facial recognition technology at airports to verify travelers' identities in place of traditional identification documents.[42] One travel analyst called 2024 the "tipping point" for widespread biometric identification, promising reduced wait times and smoother passage. But with that convenience comes a different kind of loss. What disappears, too, is the tactile record of movement—those passport books that, for so many, have served as personal archives, capturing experiences that were exciting and enriching, or stressful and gloomy, or even traumatic. The same might be said of paper more broadly: once a vital carrier of memory and record, its archival role is increasingly being taken on by digital forms.

44 *Life* magazine, of course, has already been relegated to the dustbins of media history, its final print issue published in 2000. And yet, its unique place in American culture lives on—refracted, challenged, and reimagined through works like Sterne's. Her photomontages do more than preserve a historical moment. They remind us that the materials we discard—paper, print, mass media ephemera—can carry the capacity to challenge and to remember.

45 A central theme that emerges from this research is the significance of edges and borders—both literal and metaphorical—and how artists like Sterne challenge and reimagine their function. As Ali Smith writes, "Edges involve extremes. Edges are borders. Edges are very much about identity, about who you are."[43] Like national boundaries, borders can act as constraints. Artists, however, often approach edges and borders not as fixed limits, but as zones of negotiation and meaning-making, sometimes through the medium of collage. In a collage, disparate elements are brought together in ways that confound linear narratives and fixed identities. A similar principle applies to identity papers, which juxtapose fragments of personal data to produce an official representation of the individual.

46 In line with Michel Foucault's observation that "in our time history is that which transforms documents into monuments," my analysis foregrounds the dual nature of paper: fragile yet enduring, quotidian yet powerful.[44] Sterne's archive reminds us that documents do more than record—they shape, authorize, and sometimes inflect identity. As conservators, historians, and viewers, we are tasked with attending not just to what survives, but to how it speaks. This requires both close attention to certain borders—such as national ones—as well as a broader commitment to thinking about how borders and edges can be crossed, reframed, or reassembled. Thus, by viewing Sterne's identity documents and photomontages as interconnected components of her archive, this study offers a model for how conservation and cultural analysis can work in tandem—bridging disciplinary boundaries between material culture and art history, biography and bureaucracy. It also invites us to consider broader questions about the shifting meanings of paper itself—its role in shaping lives, holding memory, and mediating the relationship between personal narrative and official history.

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NOTES

1 For more context on the history behind "the Irascibles" photograph, see Bradford R. Collins, et al. *The Irascibles: Painters against the Museum, New York, 1950*, trans. Nuria Rodríguez Riestra (Madrid: Fundación Juan March, 2020).

2 See "The Metropolitan and Modern Art," *Life* 30, no. 3 (January 15, 1951): 34-45 and Open letter to Roland L. Redmond, President of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1950 May 20. Hedda Sterne papers, 1939-1977. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

3 Oral history interview with Hedda Sterne, December 17, 1981. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Sterne also later reflected in 2003 in a conversation with Sarah Eckhardt that "We weren't a connected group . . . Everybody were only convenient alliances . . . And my work wasn't like them and they knew it and I knew it." See: Oral history with Hedda Sterne, June 26, 2003. Hedda Sterne Foundation.

4 Oral history with Hedda Sterne, June 26, 2003. Hedda Sterne Foundation.

5 Also, prior to the "The Irascibles" photograph Hedda Sterne would be included in a 1950 pictorial titled "19 Young Americans: LIFE Presents a Selection from the Country's Best Artist's under 36," *Life* 28, no. 12, March 20, 1950: 82-93. She was in fact 40 at the time.

6 Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 186.

7 Bertolt Brecht, Bertolt Brecht's *Refugee Conversations*, ed. Tom Kuhn, trans. Romy Fursland (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 7.

8 John Torpey, *The Invention of the Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 218.

9 Keshavarz, *The Design Politics of the Passport*, 35-36.

10 Roger Moorhouse notes that of the between eight and ten thousand recipients of Ładoś documents that 30-35 percent or between two and three thousand people may have survived the Holocaust. See Roger Moorhouse, *The Forgers: The Forgotten Story of the Holocaust's Most Audacious Rescue Operation* (New York: Basic Books, Hachette Book Group, 2023), 277-282.

11 Adolfo Kaminsky's career as a forger and work for the French resistance in Paris during World War II is detailed in Sarah Kaminsky, A Forger's *Life* (Los Angeles: Dopple House Pres, 2016).

12 Mahmoud Keshavarz, *The Design Politics of the Passport: Materiality, Immobility, and Dissent* (London: Bloomsbury Academic), 79.

13 Joan Simon, "Patterns of Thought: Hedda Sterne," *Art in America*,February 2007, 115.

14 Frederick Sterne moved to New York ahead of Hedda, in 1938, and changed his name to Fred Stafford. The two would ultimately divorce in 1944. See Sarah Eckhardt, Josef Helfenstein, and Lawrence Rinder, eds. *Uninterrupted Flux: Hedda Sterne, A Retrospective* (Champaign: Krannert Art Museum and Kinkead Pavilion, 2006), 117-118.

15 Eckhardt, et al., *Uninterrupted Flux*, 118. Other artists, like André Masson, Roberto Matta, and Max Ernst, were also aided in their flight from Europe by Alfred Barr, the director of MoMA at the time, and his wife, Margaret Scholari-Barr. Barr and Scholari-Barr orchestrated escapes using counterfeit passports and visas obtained through their association with Varian Fry of the Emergency Rescue Committee. Cultural, political, and economic capital often determined who gained access to these routes of escape.

16 There are no watermarks in Sterne's passport—though this absence is understandable since it was issued before the widespread adoption of that particular security measure. Watermark standardization, established by the International Civil Aviation Organization after the war, is an example of the continuous evolution of identity-document security. The introduction of specialized paper is another. Initially utilized by the United States State Department in 1930 to combat passport fraud, the paper's mechanical properties and sensitivity ensured that even the most minor alterations would be noticeable. Sterne's passport did not consist of specialized papers. Nonetheless, its papers do possess some distinct qualities—feel, color, thinness, transparency, sheen, and strength—that may have been used to distinguish it from falsified travel documents.

17 The passport stamps were likely made with aniline-based inks like Crystal Violet, reflecting wartime preferences for indelible and vividly colored inks. In 1940, the United States National Bureau of Standards prescribed standards for stamp pad inks, specifying dye and glycerol-based formulations in five hues: black, blue, green, red, and purple, with crystal violet singled out for the purple variant. The palette of inscriptions and stamps used throughout Sterne's passport includes this variety of colors, yet the specific ink types used for visas and the prevalent selection of purple remain underexplored in literature.

18 Border agents during the World War II era had to rely on rudimentary authentication methods, primarily examining passports visually. UV radiation, for instance, did not become a widely used tool for document examination until the mid-twentieth century, with the advent of portable UV devices and the incorporation of UV-reactive materials in passports (though it had been used in art conservation since

the late 1920s, when the technique was advanced by James J. Rorimer, a renowned American art historian and curator, and also one of the "Monuments Men").

19 Oral history with Hedda Sterne, June 26, 2003. Hedda Sterne Foundation.

20 Originating as David Wyman's Ph.D. dissertation at Harvard University, *Paper Walls: America and the Refugee Crisis, 1938-1941* was the first to comprehensively analyze America's refugee policy leading up to and during World War II, highlighting the barriers—or "paper walls"—that prevented many Jewish refugees from finding safety in the United States. See David S. Wyman, P*aper Walls: America and the Refugee Crisis, 1938-1941* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1968).

21 For more on the history of collage and photomontage, see Dawn Ades, Photomontage (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986) and Freya Gowrley, Fragmentary Forms: *A New History of Collage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024).

22 Earlier, in Bucharest and France, Sterne, influenced by the artists Victor Brauner, Andre Breton, Max Ernst, and Jean Arp, had experimented with Surrealist-style photomontage and created "automatically" assembled torn paper collages, a technique that epitomized Surrealism's affinity for chance, randomness, and the subconscious. Sterne had achieved some renown for this work at the 1938 Exposition du Salon des Sur-indépendants in Paris.

23 In 1942, Sterne participated in the seminal *First Papers of Surrealism* exhibition, in New York, which was curated by André Breton and Marcel Duchamp—the show's title a reference to the papers immigrants were required to file upon their entry into the United States. Sterne exhibited her Romanian torn-paper collages, which embraced chance and abstraction and predated the *Life* photomontages. The reason for this, it seems, is that the *Life* works served as private reflections on Sterne's fraught journey, the horrific events in Europe, and the escalating likelihood of full-blown U.S. involvement in the war. Given the circumstances of her journey to the U.S., it is understandable that Sterne would move away from techniques involving randomness. However, considering their power, it is intriguing to speculate why Sterne seemingly never returned to the collage medium after the Life works. Perhaps her collages served as bookends, marking the end of one life and the beginning of another.

24 Hedda Sterne, "Documents: From Studio to Gallery," *Arts Digest* 29, October 5, 1954, 4.

25 In the period of time when Sterne made the photomontages, American media coverage of the war was still tightly controlled. Visual censorship prevailed, shaped by uncertainty over the war's outcome and fears about the power of images to sway public opinion. The U.S. War Department did not begin relaxing pictorial suppression until mid-1943, when Allied victory seemed increasingly likely. Only then did *Life* begin publishing more graphic wartime images, such as George Strock's haunting photograph of dead American soldiers on Buna Beach. That image, captured in February 1943, did

not appear in print until eight months later—underscoring the delay and discretion with which *Life* mediated the war for its readers. See Erika Doss, "Introduction: Looking at Life: Rethinking America's Favorite Magazine, 1936-1972," in *Looking at Life Magazine*, ed. Erika Doss (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 1-24.

26 Oral history with Hedda Sterne, June 26, 2003. Hedda Sterne Foundation.

27 Doss, "Introduction," 7.

28 Notably, in two of the 1941-42 photomontages, the adhesive completely failed, leading to the detachment of paper components. These traces of adhesive, however, serve as valuable documentation of Sterne's artistic process, and the failure of the adhesive is what ultimately provided access to the back of the collage elements to reveal the specific source materials Sterne selected. (These works are now intact, as the Hedda Sterne Foundation had them conserved in 2016.)

29 "The American Heritage it is Ours Because Men Dared be Free," *Life* 11, no. 19,102-104, **(November 10, 1941)**

30 "Hypnotism," *Life* 11, no. 19, 77-80, **(November 10, 1941)**

31 "Baseball's Curveballs," *Life* 11, no. 1, , 83-89, **(September 15, 1941)**

32 "Atlantic War Makes Portland, Maine, a City of Rumors and Waiting Wives," *Life* 11, no. 21, 31-32, **(November 24, 1941)**

33 "Babyboom Hits Chicago's Brookfield Zoo," *Life* 11, no. 18, , 38-39, **(November 3, 1941)**

34 "Atlantic War Makes Portland, Maine, a City of Rumors and Waiting Wives," *Life* 11, no. 21, 31-32, **(November 24, 1941)**

35 "Life Goes to a Football Pep Rally," *Life* 11, no. 19, 142-144, **(November 10, 1941)**

36 "Ad for the Prudential Insurance Company of America," *Life* 11, no. 21, 30, p.30 **(November 24, 1941)**

37 Psychologist Eric Olson's seminal doctoral research at Harvard in the 1970s framed collage-making as a mirror to the mind's developmental processes and adaptability. Olson's theory helps enrich our understanding of Sterne's art, positioning it as an exploratory dialogue to process her experiences of war and emigration. For more information, see Eric W. Olson, "The Mind's Collage: Psychic Composition In Adult Life" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1976).

38 Oral history with Hedda Sterne, September 6, 2001. Hedda Sterne Foundation.

39 Cathy Caruth, *Listening to Trauma: Conversations with Leaders in the Theory and Treatment of Catastrophic Experience* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 48.

40 Oral history with Hedda Sterne, June 26, 2003. Hedda Sterne Foundation.

41 Saul Steinberg, *The Passport* (New York: Harper & Brothers), 1949.

42 Christine Chung, "Facial Recognition: Coming Soon to an Airport Near You," *The New York Times*, February 18, 2024, **https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/18/travel/facial-recognition-airports-biometrics.html.**

43 Ali Smith, "On Edge," in *The Ends of Collage*, ed. Yuval Etgar (London: Luxembourg & Dayan, 2017), 233.

44 Okwui Enwezor, "Documents into Monuments: Archives as Mediations on Time," in *Memory*, ed. Ian Farr (London: Whitechapel Gallery; Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2012), 133-136.

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