

## **Erna Leonhard's great-nephew's speech on the occasion of the Stolperstein laying at Alte Alle 17, Berlin-Eichkamp, on 2 September 2012**

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to the members of your initiative whose aim is to commemorate your former fellow neighbours.

But where did Erna Leonhard and her son Leonor come from?

How did they live and how did they die?

Erna Leonhard née Hirschfeld was born on 23 June 1893 in Werl/Westphalia. Her ancestors of the eighteenth century were citizens of the relatively tolerant principality of Anhalt. Her family adopted the name Hirschfeld early in the nineteenth century in order to pay their respects to the then very popular Prussian general. General Hirschfeld, during the wars of liberation had inter alia recaptured the Prussian provincial fortress Magdeburg.

Two boys were born into the family around 1870, Berthold, my grandfather, and Hermann, Erna's father. Berthold was soon convinced that the already apparent problem of anti-Semitism was to be solved only by assimilation which meant complete integration into the Christian majority of the Germans. After all, Jews and Christians pray to the same God. Consequently, he converted to Christianity and married a Christian girl.

His brother Hermann, Erna's father, however, maintained his Jewish belief. He attended a Jewish teacher training college which enabled him to work as a teacher of religious education and later as a rabbi. He also held several leading positions in Jewish organizations. The famous Rabbi Leo Baeck was one of his close friends. Together with Leo Baeck and other brothers in faith he produced a modern Jewish translation of the Bible. Hermann Hirschfeld died in 1937 in a hospital in Berlin.

Erna's mother came from the former West Prussia (now Poland). She lost her father early in life and grew up in impoverished conditions. Later she became a dedicated wife and mother who always ran a well-organized household. Thus her three children Erna, Lucia and Hans Hermann experienced a pleasant and carefree childhood and adolescence.

Erna's mother was deported to the concentration camp at Theresienstadt (Terezin) where she suffered from malnutrition which resulted in death by starvation on 13 January 1944.

Back to Erna. She longed to become an actress. However, her father made her first attend a business school to learn the basics of office work. He wanted to enable her, if necessary, to make her own living before allowing her to attend a drama school. After graduation she gave performances at various theatres and her poetry evenings were well recognized.

Early in the nineteen-twenties she met the progressive author and playwright Rudolf Leonhard and fell in love. Their mutual son Leonor Leonhard was born on 5 April 1923, but their marriage soon broke up. Leonor's half-brother was the famous author, journalist and historian Wolfgang Leonhard

who became well-known for his best-selling non-fiction book "Die Revolution entlässt ihre Kinder" (1954) ("Child of the Revolution" 1955).

During the Nazi era Erna was no longer allowed to perform on stage. She was, therefore, forced to use the skills she had acquired at the business school and work as a secretary. She held her last post at the "Reichsvereinigung der Juden in Deutschland" (Imperial Association of the Jews in Germany). This Jewish organization was under complete control of the "Gestapo" (Geheime Staatspolizei = Secret State Police). Nevertheless, Erna was very engaged in helping as many Jews as possible to escape from Germany as well as alleviating the hardship of the deportation.

Erna was deported, together with her son Leonor and her colleagues of the Jewish "Reichsvereinigung", with the 36th East Transport to the concentration camp Auschwitz on 12 March 1944.

I remember Erna and Leonor just vaguely. Probably I saw them only once when I was a small boy. However, I cannot forget her and her sad fate.

Translated by Elke Elsner