

Dr. MURIEL STERN

Myers: This is part of the Oral History of Psychology in Canada. I am talking with Muriel Stern in her office in the Department of Psychology at McGill University, on December 8, 1969. Muriel, let's start at the beginning, where were you born?

Stern: I was born in New York City.

Myers: Into what kind of a family, what did your father do?

Stern: My father was a confident ~~SE~~ man. He was an extremely intelligent, attractive, sexy man who would have been a genius if he had ever put his mind to that - - - but he liked manipulating people.

Myers: And did this lead to all sorts of trouble?

Stern: Incredible trouble, eventually.

Myers: Brothers and sisters?

Stern: No.

Myers: The only child.

Stern: The only child.

Myers: And where did you go to school?

Stern: I went to thirteen schools before I finished high school. If you want to name all the major cities in the United States, I went to school there.

Myers: In New York mostly?

Stern: No, we moved from New York at the age of 6 months, went to school in Cincinnati, Ohio, Miami, Florida, Seattle, Washington...

Myers: Was this because your father was moving?

Stern: He always went where the operation was. You know, we always stayed until after the crash.

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Myers: Was this because your father was moving?

Stern: He always went where the operation was. You know, we always stayed until after the crash.

Myers: So you were very rapidly changing schools. Have you got any recollections at all of when you first heard the word "psychology" and did it have any meaning to you? Was this before you went to university or after?

Stern: I went to university at the age of 30, as a freshman. That's one of the reasons why I am such a late starter. I was 39 when I got my Ph.D.

Myers: Have you got any notion where you first encountered psychology?

Stern: Probably when I was typing papers for my now husband who was then a student in Psychology at McGill. I was a stenographer and he was a pre-medical student.

Myers: And it was not until that, you don't remember that you came across a book on the subject?

Stern: I read Kraft... ^{Ebbing} on the floor of the closed closet with a flashlight. It was part of our work library. We always had a lot of books around. I think it was stylish to have it in the '20s.

Myers: Freud too?

Stern: No, I hadn't any real contact with Freud and Freud's ideas until I was about 18 or 19.

Myers: After your schooling, you didn't go straight to University then?

Stern: No, it was mid-depression. I went to work. I worked until my husband went into practice as a psychiatrist and at that point I started McGill as a freshman.

Myers: Were you secretary in the department of psychology?

Stern: No.

Myers: But it was typing his papers on psychology. Where did you work?

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Myers: But it was typing his papers on psychology. Where did you work?

Stern: I worked for five years for an insurance company.

Myers: First, how did you get to Montreal, why?

Stern: When my mother and father were finally divorced, and my mother came home and her home was Montreal.

Myers: So you did have family. Born in New York, that gave you optional citizenship. What did you opt for?

Stern: I opted for Canadian citizenship at 30 when Roy and I came back from New York where he finished his training. He came back to Montreal and then I said "it's time I became a full citizen".

Myers: Is your husband a Canadian?

Stern: Yes, he was born in Montreal.

Myers: Let's start then with the formal part of your university training. did you start as an undergraduate?

Stern: Yes.

Myers: And did you take so called Honours psychology?

Stern: Yes I took Honours psychology.

Myers: By this time, your husband's interest in psychiatry had generated, corresponding interest in you, is that why you chose it?

Stern: Yes, that's why I chose it. But it soon became clear to me that his branch of psychology and mine were different and that I had no real interest in clinical or applied psychology.

Myers: When you went into it, you thought it would be?

Stern: Yes, as a matter of fact, I had intended to go into medicine myself, but I changed my mind.

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Myers: When did you have that ambition. At what stage in your life, were you planning to be a doctor?

Stern: At about 16.

Myers: Why didn't you go in?

Stern: Nothing went wrong with it. It was simply that I realized that what I really would find much more fulfilling was psychology. But this I realized at McGill as an undergraduate in Honours psychology.

Myers: Who gave you your first course?

Stern: Donald...

Myers: In what year?

Stern: in 1949.

Myers: This was the famous Hebb introductory?

Stern: Yes.

Myers: Do you attribute your subsequent developing interest in psychology mostly to that first course?

Stern: In a peculiar kind of way, I started going to those lectures; I sat in the first row of a very large hall and, as the year progressed, I moved back row after row after row until finally I sat beside the door so I could go out when the anxiety attack it. Because everything about this course was antipathical to all the ideas I had brought to it. I had now been married to a psychiatrist for several years. And everything that Hebb said ^{up}obset me. I finally decided that I had to learn this stuff to pass the course.

Myers: This was by ~~vicarious~~ ^{vicarious} anxiety on behalf of your husband.

Stern: Probably or even my own intellectual unity. That summer, I read

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the Organization of Behaviour and while I certainly didn't understand all of it, because I had had only one course in psychology, I began to understand and by that it was almost as if the world had changed and I was no longer quite so uncomfortable. It wasn't that I caught the disease. It was much more that I was able to say their alternative explanations for behaviour and I can start looking at them a little differently. And that's when really when I started thinking about becoming a psychologist because I no longer had the confidence for myself and Freudian ideas. I became fascinated and interested by psychological ideas of a different kind.

Myers: Did you talk about this with your husband much of these ideas?

Stern: Yes and since there is nothing about him, he is not an analyst. He is quite eclectic psychiatrist. We both found it very interesting. It was never in any way offensive to him. We talked about that sort of thing more in those days than we do today when we take it for granted.

Myers: As you moved along through the courses, who else did you encounter?

Stern: Dalbir Bindra. I took comparative psychology from him. I remember calling it with this isn't comparative psychology, this is course in some rats I have known. I had great joy really in arguing with him and then I also took my course in contemporary problems and historical perspective from him. He was always a person whose ideas were so clear. It was possible to argue with him.

Myers: Was this in a large class?

Stern: Quite small class.

Myers: Is he as quiet spoken as a teacher as he is in ordinary conversation?

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Myers: Is he as quiet spoken as a teacher as he is in ordinary conversation?

Stern: Yes. He is quiet spoken. He is always in control of the situation of himself, in the situation.

Myers: Is he always very well organized and ready in the sense that he knows exactly what he wants to do next?

Stern: Very well organized. He is the best organized person that I know.

Myers: In teaching and also in research.

Stern: He budgets himself. He is able to do all kinds of things. He enjoys life. He has many interests and he accomplishes a great deal despite the fact that he has this variety of interests.

Myers: But your initial reaction to him was negative?

Stern: Oh yes.

Myers: And remained negative? Or did you begin to see something?

Stern: No, I am a rat psychologist.

Myers: But did this happen during that course?

Stern: No, not during that course. But during the following year when I took the course in contemporary problems and historical perspective and started to get some perspective in psychology or a perspective in psychology, one that I thought I could be comfortable with.

Myers: What did he use in that historical perspective course?

Stern: He used Woodworth. The small contemporary school and that was about six weeks at the beginning of the course and he really talked about contemporary problems as they were in 1952. I remember that suddenly there were all kinds of ways of looking at problems that I had never seen before, but he presented them very well. Do you know that one of the best courses I ever had in psychology at McGill was from Ed Webster in Industrial Psychology. I took it because

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I had registered for a course in English Drama and I decided that I didn't like the course and didn't like the professor and I had read all the plays anyway, there wasn't any point in going on with that, so the second half of that year, I had to find two half courses in psychology. One of them was Ed's Industrial which I took thinking "I don't know what I'm gonna do with this" and it was also one of the best organized course and it had more data in it than any course that I took as an undergraduate. It was really industrial social and then I -

Myers: What did he use by the way?

Stern: He used a text by Blom which is quite a progressive text. It was one of the few texts has been oriented. It was employee-oriented. He also used some other readings that were management-oriented.

Myers: He was talking to me about Moores industrial psychology...

Stern: That would be more contemporary. That would be more today. Now I am talking about 1952.

Myers: Wasn't it out then?

Stern: He didn't use it.

Myers: Did he teach this all himself or did he have somebody...

Stern: He taught it all by himself.

Myers: O.K. next?

Stern: Lucans in social psychology. Lucans was a very very difficult man and his approach to psychology was one that can save your sanity in a funny kind of way because it was antipathetical to everything else in the department. And it meant that one had to seat back and take a measure of the behavioured approach that we were getting and almost everything else. Lucans is one of the

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and it was phenomenology and psychology and was excellent and good perspective and so that it meant an evaluation.

Myers: What was that course called?

Stern: Social psychology. His text was , social psychology. His lectures you can find in a book called social psychology by Ash. They were both boys and I would say that they got their lecture notes from him because they were identical. I recognized everything that I read in Ash's text when it came out as the lectures that Lucans had given.

Myers: So they probably both got much of this material from their master.

Stern: Another person who was at McGill at that time was John Zubeck. And John taught physiological. And I used to take great joy because I soon learned that if you asked John a question, it threw him completely.

Myers: So you asked questions...

Stern: That's right. He had to get back at the desk somehow and I am afraid I picked it out on John. He organized his lectures so carefully and if you asked him a question, he was lost. And of course I had experimental psychology from George and I remember the first time we get together in his class, George said: "Hum, hum, I used to have notes, I seem to have lost them, there will be no lecture".

Myers: What was it?

Stern: Then it was a seminar from that point on. I think he was kidding.

Myers: How many in this group?

Stern: 8 or 9

Myers: Was this heavily statistical design oriented?

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Myers: Was this heavily statistical design oriented?

Stern: It was really re-putting of one's plans and of designing one's own study and reporting progress. I think the first half of it had some psychophysics. We were learning some psychophysical methods but as I recall it was primarily what we were doing, what we were up to.

Myers: And this led up to an exercise in an experiment of your own.

Stern: And then in 4th year, Hebb took that course which was just a seminar in the B.A. thesis, B.Sc.

Myers: And you graduated in...

Stern: I got my B.Sc. in 1952 and I got the psychology prize in first class honours and I was told that I couldn't go on to graduate work, for a number of reasons. One was that I was a married woman of 34 and what could my motivations be. Hebb suggested that I wanted some status and I told him that in my circle a mink coat would buy me more status. But then they said I'd go into clinical. It was very odd. They said they wanted some intelligent people in clinical. Anyway, finally, because Hebb said I was the most severe woman he had never meet, (I was very persistent), I got a letter from George who said that I could go into the Master's at McGill, but I was to understand that under no circumstances, would have been continued to the Ph.D. and this was for my own good and besides which if I did get a Ph.D. where would I work. So, I did my Master's thesis, actually did it with Ed. It was psychological characteristics of three groups of Iroquois Indians. It was being original.

Myers: What was involved? Testing Indians?

Stern: Yes. I did TATs. I was combining an interest in anthropology and psychology. That point I hadn't really decided where I was going, what really interested me.

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was informed that Dalbir Bindra would hire me as a research assistant for the year. So I started on my Ph.D. thesis project with Dalbir's research assistant. And when I was writing my Ph.D. thesis, he was in England. Then he needed somebody to take over his section of Introductory Psychology, so that when I was writing my Ph.D. thesis, I started teaching Introductory Psychology and Statistics. And somehow rather they haven't fire me.

Myers: Did they accept you as a Ph.D. candidate after this year as a research assistant for Dalbir or before?

Stern: After that year, but it didn't matter. It just meant that for the first time since I had stopped being a secretary, I got some pay.

Myers: And what do you remember about your doctoral program at McGill. This would be in...

Stern: I did my Master's in 1952-54 and I guess in 55 I was out and 56 and 57. My doctoral program was extremely complicated. I took advanced statistics from George, Hebb's seminar and 2 other seminars of my choice, one of which was physiological and comparative and the other was human experimental. Physiological and comparative from Peter and Don -

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