

This is an interview with Ernest Fontheim on March 12, 1997. The interviewer is Randy Goldman. And this is tape one, side A.

My name is Ernest Gunter Fontheim. I was born in Berlin, Germany on October 23, 1922.

Tell me a little bit about your family and your life before the war.

My father was a lawyer and notary, which a notary is in Germany a more sort of official position than here in this country. And it also requires legal training. And my mother was actually trained as a French teacher but didn't practice it. She actually spoke fluent French. But she didn't teach school.

I also had a sister, five years younger than I. Her name was Eva Irene. She was born in 1927. My family background was that I-- my parents were completely assimilated in German culture and the German way of life. And there were very few sort of Jewish observances. My mother went with us to the synagogue on the high holidays. That is the only thing I remember.

I remember much more distinctly, however, that we celebrated Christmas. We had a Christmas tree every year. Santa Claus came and distributed gifts. And I woke up really knowing very little about being Jewish, except I knew that I was Jewish. Also my father had a very extensive library. He was actually generally very widely read and widely educated.

I do not remember any Jewish books. The books that we had were just general literature, German writers, Shakespeare, of course. And the particular pride of my father was a 54 volume edition of the collected works of Goethe, the German playwright and philosopher of the early 19th century. And we were, as far as I can tell, relatively well-off.

We went on summer vacations every year. And I particularly was sent during the summer vacations from maybe the age of 10 on or so to a camp. These camps were usually all Jewish camps. They were headed usually by a Jewish sports teacher and were located-- they were different from American camps in that they didn't have a specific camp location.

But instead, the head of the camp, the sports teacher, would contract with some vacation owner of a building, of a vacation house in the mountains or near the sea to rent that house for a period of about four weeks, I guess, or six weeks. And then he would take the kids to that place and, of course, with a number of assistants and so on. I personally would have liked much better to be going on vacations with my parents.

But my father worked very hard. And I was always told that my father needed sort of complete rest and relaxation. And that it was just too much of a commotion if we kids would also come along. And usually what happened was after a few days of being homesick, then I got sort of sucked into the activities of the camp, made some friends. And then in some of the cases actually some school friends of mine from the school in Berlin were at the same camp, so I had already ready made friends there. And from then on, I usually enjoyed these vacations.

My contact with Judaism really became stronger basically as a result of two events. The first one was Hitler's assumption of power in January 1933. Where-- in the school where I was, I was made to feel that I was different. Although the first year, there was very little Nazi activity in the school. The school I went to, incidentally, was the Mommsen Gymnasium, named after the German historian of the Roman Empire Theodore Mommsen who actually personally was a very liberal-minded historian.

And gymnasium or gymnasium in German means really classical high school. I-- that school received, got a new principal in the year 1934. He was a retired Army Colonel who had fought the First World War and also was a through and through convinced Nazi ideologue. And right after his assumption of the principalship, he announced in a school assembly that it was his goal to make the school a sort of a sample for Nazi ideological indoctrination.

At that point, many Jewish kids were taken out of that school by their parents and sent for other schools. I stayed in. And after one year of that principal, only two kid-- Jewish kids were left, another boy and I. The principal introduced all kinds of new activities. Like, for example, before the beginning of the school day, the entire school had to assemble for

a sort of like a war military roll call.

Behind the school building, there was a big sports field. And we assembled there and had to stand at military attention and while the principal read a particular paragraph that he had selected for that day out of Hitler's book *Mein Kampf*, as sort of motto for the day. And during lunch hour, after we had eaten our food, we usually marched, the entire school, in military formation through the streets of the neighborhood singing Nazi songs.

[CLEARS THROAT]

After one year of his principalship, as I said, there were two kids left. And he asked us to come into his office. And that - in Germany where the principal in general is a fellow of a much more fearsome authority than he is here now, in addition to that, of course, we know where he stood for, though it was a somewhat intimidating experience. When we were in his office, he told us that he could not really see having Jewish children in his school, which he wanted to make as a purely Germanic or Aryan school, as serving as a sample for all other schools in Germany.

But he also had no legal way to expel us from the school. So he thought about it and came to the following conclusion that there were basically two options, either our parents withdrew us voluntarily or he would simply resign the principalship because he would not be able under those conditions to carry out his goals. And with that message, we were sent home. Our fathers got together on the telephone and discussed that this was obviously a veiled threat. And we were never sent back to that school.

I was surprised when you mentioned that you were sent to a Jewish camp.

Oh, yeah, well, after 1933, there was increasing pressure really for to keep Jews and non-Jews apart. I think maybe in '33 or '34, I may still have been in a mixed camp. But after that, such camps simply didn't exist anymore. Actually there was an additional reason, that all youth activities for Germans were progressively taken over by the Hitler Youth Organization. They went on summer excursions, on hikes, and so on.

And German children, initially, were just sort of socially pressured to participate. But I think in the mid-'30s, I don't remember the year, maybe '36 or so, it was actually made compulsory that every German kid as a boy had-- so sorry, had to be in the Hitler Youth. And it had a parallel growth organization which was called-- well, it was a German word. *Bund Deutscher Madel* means association of German girls. And girls were compulsory in that organization.

And if there were any organization outside of the Hitler Youth, they definitely would not be permitted to have any Jewish children in them. So that was not a religious thing. These camps-- actually I remember one camp where I was where the head was actually a woman sports teacher. And she was a very strong Zionist. And she would have Friday evening sort of Shabbat ceremonies and carry on other Jewish activities.

And in all the other camps, they were Jewish only to the extent that both the head and teachers, as well as all the kids, were Jews. But otherwise, there were no Jewish-related activities there.

Now prior to Hitler, do you remember any instances of anti-Semitism? Did you get along well with your neighbors and your schoolmates?

Yes. No, I mean, I don't remember such instances. I always got along. The strange thing is that practically all, with one exception, all of my friends were always Jewish kids. That happened somehow naturally, I don't know. There was surely no-- I wasn't told by my parents to have Jewish friends exclusively. But that's the way it turned out.

And but even after Hitler came to power, I had-- I mean, I had no-- I do not remember any incidents where I was either attacked or had any violence on the part of my German schoolchildren. In fact, initially my reaction to the Nazi seizure of power was that I felt sorry for myself for not being an Aryan, I mean a German kid, that I couldn't participate in all the what I considered fun things that they were doing, you know, games and so on.

And it was really only after I was expelled from the German school-- actually, let me back up. I said earlier that my

relationship to Judaism changed drastically for two reasons. I mean, one was Hitler's accession to power, which basically forced me to confront my Jewishness. The other was my bar mitzvah, which came up in 1935, which required me to take several times a week preparatory lessons both for the Parsha which I was going to read from the Torah on the Shabbat doing services on my bar mitzvah, as well as additional sort of Jewish history and some Hebrew.

And that-- and then on top of it also in 1935 was my expulsion from the Mommsen Gymnasium by this anti-Semitic principle. And my parents then transferred me to a very Orthodox Jewish school. That has always been a puzzle in my mind. My parents never explained it. There were other Jewish schools, which were much less orthodox. But they transferred me to the most orthodox of Jewish schools in Berlin.

In fact, it was a school associated with a sort of separatist congregation. All of the rest of the Jewish community was in one large sort of super congregation. I think that is in most European cities like that where Jewish communal life is handled by one big congregation. And that congregation also is responsible for building synagogues according to different needs.

I mean, there were one or two reform synagogue-- oh--

Sorry.

There were one or two reform synagogues in Berlin and many what was called liberal synagogues. That was a sort of predominant denomination. In spite of the name, the liberal synagogues were about very close to what is called conservative here in this country. The service was almost entirely in Hebrew with only one or two prayers in German.

However, in most liberal synagogues, organs were also present. And otherwise the service, also the selection of prayers, was basically the same as that in the conservative synagogues and a much more extensive than in reform synagogues in this country. But all of the synagogues were essentially the responsibility of the central congregation. And also there were a number of orthodox synagogues.

But the school into which I was transferred to was from a separatist, very orthodox congregation, affiliated with the Agudath Israel, which is a worldwide sort of umbrella organization of orthodox congregations. I think the reason was that school had an excellent reputation. While it obviously taught a lot of Judaism, Hebrew and Jewish history and so on, but there, of course, they still-- they were governed by the German education law and had to provide, therefore, all of the curriculum that regular German schools had to offer in mathematics and science and literature and so on.

But obviously, that was a tremendous change for me, well, of a change of cultures coming from that militaristic Nazi school, now to a very Orthodox Jewish school, which at the beginning when I came there seemed to be without any semblance of discipline. I myself have always been somewhat of a rebel in the sense that I resented authority.

And even in the Mommsen Gymnasium, which was governed, I mean, by this Prussian ex-officer, there were a number of boys to whom I also belonged to that have tried to get away with things. Now when I came to the Jewish school, I really revelled in the fact that there seemed to be no discipline at all. And people even talk back to their teachers. And I must say I enjoyed that very much.

And in spite of that, the funny thing is I learned. You know, the thing is that the excuse for extreme discipline is always that it is needed in order for the kids to learn. I mean, I realize there has to be a certain amount of discipline. But in the German schools, at least at the Nazi time, that was an ideology by itself to in its own right, discipline, of course, as a provocation for later military.

Now didn't you experience anti-Semitism from your schoolmates at the Mommsen school?

I don't think-- no, I didn't. In fact, one-- I remember that one of my non-Jewish, we weren't really friends, but we sort of spend some time together frequently in school doing inter-- doing intermissions and so on, recess is the word, doing recess. He was-- he had joined the Hitler Youth. And he had given me a small Hitler Youth pennant with a swastika which I proudly displayed.

And unfortunately, it turned out that on that day we had at home a party, I forgot what the cause was. There were relatives there. And of course, all the people who came were Jews. And in the middle of it, I burst with my swastika flag and holding it proudly and marched in there. And I remember that my mother took me very forcefully by my arm, took me out to my room, and gave me a horrific beating, and told me that I should never dare to bring that flag home. Then she tore it up.

And I felt terribly sorry for myself and thought of as a victim of-- but as I said, that was in the beginning when I felt that being Jewish was basically a punishment. And it took a number of jolts for me to realize really what was behind that and also what my Judaism really meant to me. The anti-Semitism that I encountered was mainly from the teachers. That principle I-- maybe I forgot to mention that.

He also taught. That was common in German schools. And he was our math teacher. And he made frequent anti-Semitic remarks and derogatory remarks about Jews in his mathematics class. And then we had a German teacher who was, if anything, even worse. And on the other hand, some of the older teachers were very Democratic.

Our Latin teacher, who was an elderly gentleman, in fact was the only teacher with whom-- to whom my mother took me after I left school [? very ?] from one day to the next to say goodbye. And he lived only a few blocks away from us. And we went there. And he was, I still remember it, very nice to me and shook my hand and wished me all best of luck for my future.

So I think some of the older teachers were definitely not Nazis. And most of the younger ones were. And in addition, of course, the principal, who was an elderly gentleman, he must have been already in his late 50s at that time.

How did you feel hearing these remarks by your teachers? Do you remember?

I felt hurt basically. And I mean, I felt that, I mean, it was really like a physical slap in the face, except this was not physical but emotional. And I mean, I felt, even at that time, that the men had no reason to attack me that way.

Did you talk about this with your parents? Did they make some sense out of it for you?

I don't remember it. But it's possible that I did. I don't-- I mean, there are many things that I don't really understand about my parents. And I feel in a way terrible about it. Of course, in the beginning, I was too little. But later on, I was a teenager and then finally an upper teenager and even 20 years old by the time they were arrested.

And but I don't-- I don't really understand many of the actions they took and their motivations. And I've-- that is one of the things I've been trying for years and years sort of to reconstruct, no understanding now how they thought and what their mental sort of outlook was to explain, you know, why they acted the way they did. It's very different.

I mean, for example, my father's decision during the first year of Hitler not to emigrate was based-- that is one thing, one of the few things I can understand, as strange as it may sound. But the thing was that Jewish lawyers, the large group of Jews-- or the majority of Jewish lawyers were disbarred within a few weeks after the Nazis took power.

There were two groups of lawyers which were exempted, one were the frontline soldiers from World War I, which my father was not. And the other one were lawyers who had already been admitted to the bar under the Kaiser, that means before the-- before the outbreak of World War I. And that's the category my father fell in. And many of the lawyers who were then disbarred lost their livelihood overnight.

And the only thing they could do, unless they wanted to dig ditches in Germany, was to emigrate. And most of them did. And on the other hand, my father always considered himself lucky that he was exempted. Because he-- at each stage of the Nazi development of the anti-Semitic policies, the Jews always were under the illusion that this is the way. OK, the Nazis want to do business and that's-- but we can live with it. And that's the way it's going to remain.

In retrospect, the fact that my father was in one of the exempted groups was not his luck, but it was his death sentence.

Because otherwise he would have left Germany. He-- in fact, one remark I still remember vividly, when others urged him to emigrate, he would say, here I am a lawyer. If I go to New York, all I can become is a dishwasher. And what should I do with German law in New York?

And, you know, logically that made total sense. In '35, who would have ever thought of gas chambers. And plus the thought also was that since Hitler was constantly breaking agreements with the Allies, particularly Britain and France, that one of these days they would have enough and just take care of him. At that time, their military force was still much bigger than that of Germany.

And my father thought, if I stay here, then I'll just pick up where I left off in '33. And all of that, if I think back, really made sense and the framework-- I mean, putting myself into the framework of my parents at that time and, of course, ignoring the history that occurred later, which is just hindsight.

I mean, obviously, my parents also were-- and that may have been in general in those days-- very, what should I say, sort of withdrawn in terms of say financial things and so on. I mean, they never discussed any of these things with us, even as I got older. But I am now certain looking back that the income of my father from his law practice must have plummeted.

Because, I mean, first of all, many of his clients were Gentiles. And there was to-- if a German Gentile, so-called Aryan, appeared in court with a Jewish lawyer, that already was not one strike but 10 strikes against him. And most of the judges were fierce Nazis. So who would want a Jewish lawyer? And so I'm sure that most of the non-Jewish clients must have left him.

Of course, he may have picked up some Jewish clients because-- from those lawyer, Jewish lawyers, who were disbarred. I don't know how that evened out. But I'm fairly certain that his income must have declined after '33. He had actually a very well going practice. He had a member-- he used to talk about one of the most famous German movie actresses he represented in her divorce.

And then he had some members of the Hohenzollern family, that was the family of the last German Kaiser. In fact, the nephew of the Kaiser and his mother, who was a sister-in-law of the Kaiser, were his clients. And in fact, they stuck with him till the end. That's very interesting. But his-- their cases did never involve court appearances. He sort of drew up personal worlds for them and made property arrangements and advice and things like that, where he didn't really appear in public for them. Let me see.

Well, why don't-- let me ask you.

Oh, yep.

Hitler came to power. Can you kind of describe to me the progression of the events and regulations and--

Well--

--policy that altered your life and your lifestyle?

In the beginning, I mean, I must say also one thing is my parents, in retrospect, made-- must have made heroic efforts to insulate us children from all of these events. Initially, we didn't notice anything. In fact, that is a little story that I didn't really plan to tell you. But I was-- in January '33, I was 10 years old. And I had scarlet fever. It's a childhood disease which doesn't exist anymore. But in those days, kids had it.

And our pediatrician, who was also a distant relative, it was still in the days of house calls, came every day and looked me over, looked into my throat, and so on. And he came at a certain time, in the morning at some point. And it was sort of a regular routine. The bell would ring. My mother would come into my room with him. And then he would examine me.

On one day, and now I know it was the 30th of January 1933. Instead of coming in, my mother and he were outside the door of my room, but with the door closed, and sort of in a low voice, which I couldn't understand, kept talking and talking and talking. And finally, they came in. And I was very sort of disappointed, not only because of the change in routine but somehow I wasn't that important.

And they talked. And then I asked them, what's the matter? And my mother said in a grave voice, Hitler has just been appointed chancellor. And at that time, it sort of went in here, out there. It didn't mean anything. I knew I was 10 years old. So as a German. There had been several elections before. So the house walls and public places were plastered with election placards.

And so I remember having seen, Vote for Hitler and Vote for Thalmann, who was a Communist Party leader, and Vote for this man. And Germany also had many parties. And so vaguely the name Hitler rang a bell. But I had no idea basically who he was, what he stood for, and so on. Now coming specifically to your question, the first real change was that eviction from the Mommsen Gymnasium.

Before that, the laws, you know, there were laws, of course, as I said, about disbaring lawyers. Well, it didn't affect me. And it didn't-- unfortunately, it did not affect my father either. And then there were many other-- there were not too many laws until '35. In '35, the so-called Nuremberg laws were passed, which actually defined Jews as second-class citizens.

But that also had no immediate effect. The main effect was also that Jews not only could not marry a Gent-- I mean, Aryan Gentiles. But even the act of intercourse without being married was a punishable offense. And but obviously, I was 12, 13 years old, that was the last thing on my mind. So and second-class citizenship had, of course, trickled through and had many other effects, which at that point did not affect me yet.

But as I said, the eviction from the school did. But also our lifestyle never changed. I mean, we went on-- my parents went on their summer vacations. And my sister and I went to our camps. And we had, I mean, we were clothed. We had food to eat. And in fact, oh yeah, big change also was that the Nazis were totally obsessed, I mean, with the idea that the Jews were sort of spoiling the German race.

And most Jewish families, at least middle and upper middle classes, had maids. And in those days, maids were usually live-in maids. And as one of the outgrowth of the Nuremberg laws was that any Jewish household which has a male, a Jewish male in the household, was forbidden to have a German maid who is below 45 years of age.

So we had-- I think we had one at a time. So we had to dismiss her and took an older woman. You could take an older one. I mean, that was all that obsession with-- that maybe a Jew would then father an illegitimate child with such a maid. I don't even know whether maybe there were such cases. But they were-- it was almost a sickness with the Nazis.

Well anyway, I then started at the Jewish school. And I remember there were several kids besides myself in my grade who started new there. Now, we were up to grade level in all the general subjects, like math, German, and so on. But in the Jewish subjects and particularly in Hebrew, our classmates were already freely translating the Torah, the Tanakh, the entire Bible from English-- from Hebrew into German.

And I could barely sort of read stammeringly and so did the others. So they instituted a sort of second track Hebrew for us assimilated kids. And for the first class, the principal, a Dr. Schlesinger, came in to give us a little pep talk about the importance of knowing Hebrew for Jewish children. And after he was finished, he said, OK, tomorrow will be the first-- now he dismissed us. Tomorrow will be the first real class.

And we are supposed to bring, he wrote on the board, a certain grammar by so-and-so, which you could buy at some bookstore that he named, and a copy of the Chumash. And as soon as he said that, my arm shot up. And he pointed at me. And I asked, what is a Chumash? And that question completely floored that principal. He couldn't imagine a Jewish boy asking, being so unbelievably ignorant that he wouldn't know what a Chumash is.

And so all he could-- he sort of walked-- and also he was a short, very thin, wiry man with a reddish goatee, a bald head

but a fringe of red hair onto his back of his head. And his entire head, as I remember it, turned red, just as his beard. He walked toward me. And finally, I guess, he took some time to think about what to say. And then he said, you are a Jew. And you don't know what a Chumash is. And of course, that question totally demolished me. And I sat down and felt as if I had said something that--

This is an interview with Ernest Fontheim on March 12, 1997. Tape one, side B.

Yeah, my immediate reaction was that I was totally embarrassed by the principal's remark. And but soon, as a result of the very strong Jewish education, which was part of the curriculum in that school, I started to become more and more interested in that. The name of the school actually, that is very important, was Adas Israel. It means Jewish congregation or Jewish community.

And it came to the point even where I decided that I wanted to become a rabbi when I grow up and-- which very much upset my father particularly. I started to go regularly to a Shabbat services. And Berlin had many synagogues. And as I said before, there was only one congregation which ran all of the synagogues in Berlin and also the rabbis, therefore, were not confined to one synagogue.

So one didn't have to put up with the same rabbi Shabbat after Shabbat, the way it is here, for example, in this country, where each congregation has its own rabbi. But instead, the rabbi circulated. But obviously, Berlin is a big city. And it was taken for granted that they would take public transport to go to the various synagogues, which were widely scattered in different parts of the city.

So I particularly became very fond of two rabbis who were both very dynamic and also gave me a lot of moral support in their sermons. One was a Dr. Max Nussbaum who later emigrated to this country and became a rabbi in Hollywood, California. And the other one was Dr. Manfred Swarsensky who came to this country and actually founded a synagogue in Madison, Wisconsin.

I never saw Nussbaum again. But Swarsensky, I visited in the mid-60s when I went to a scientific conference in Madison. I knew he was there, so I contacted him before. And we set up a luncheon where we spent several hours together, just talking and reminiscing. I-- yeah, in that, so the years went by from '35 to '38. And by 1938, I must have been in about the 10th grade.

And in October 1938, the German police arrested all Jews who had Polish passports overnight without any prior warning. In fact, they came in the early morning hours and put them on-- into railroad cars which were already prepared beforehand. And they were shipped off to Poland. And the only thing the Germans saw to it was that they had their Polish passports with them.

Because by international law, the Poles had to admit anyone who had a valid Polish passport. And there were quite a number of kids from my class affected by that and even a few teachers who didn't appear on the next day.

What did-- what were you thinking when all this was happening?

That was terrible. I mean, I still remember-- I mean, these kids that was actually the first foretaste of the later deportations. I mean, people just vanished overnight. They didn't-- the day before, nobody knew anything. They didn't know. We didn't know. And on the next day, they just didn't appear in school. Our Hebrew teacher was one of them. And then several kids-- one of them, but that's besides the point here, I met again 30 years later in Israel where he is, oh gosh, by now he must be retired. He was a professor of classical languages at Hebrew University.

What's surprising me about what you're telling me is that you're-- what I'm understanding here is that, until 1938, your life went on pretty much the way it had before except for that you changed schools. You haven't described any real hardships or laws or regulations that affected you personally. Is that true?

That's true. I mean, that was my-- I mean, first of all, it's 50, 60 years later, what I remember now. But I think my memory is pretty good as far as that is concerned. That doesn't mean that these regulations didn't exist. They-- but they

didn't really touch me personally. And as I said, after I've read a lot of what happened in those days, and I see now that my parents must have made a sort of monumental effort to keep things away from us.

That's the only explanation I have. Well, one thing that I noticed also maybe in my life and that was that earlier I think in either late '37 or early '38, all Jewish stores were required to put the names of their owners in letters of a prescribed size on the store window and not in an artistic way as an-- so in a way that identified the store as a Jewish store because no other store, in white paint, of a prescribed size.

But again, we didn't have a store. I just-- I noticed that this is what happening-- what was happening. Another thing that's happened also was that all Jews were forced to adopt an additional middle name, males, the name Israel, and females, the name Sarah. I guess here in this country, there are many non-Jews, Jewish women, who are called Sarah. But in Germany, the name Sarah is totally unknown. It was purely a Jewish name and Israel, anyway.

So and also, the law stipulated not only that we had to take those names but that we had to use it, particularly in all communications with government agencies, also with commercial enterprises and so on. Like I had to call myself Ernest Israel Fontheim, written out. And my father had to do the same thing. It was of course also a humiliation. And in addition to that, it was a sort of signal for the recipient, ah-ha, this is a Jew who's writing to me.

Could you play in public parks? Could you ride--

Yeah.

--on buses?

Yeah.

You could do all of that stuff.

Right. At that time, there were no restrictions of any sort to our life. We could go to movie theaters. I could go to-- now, there were places which on their own initiative had posted signs, Jews of [GERMAN] Juden Unerwünscht in German. That means Jews are not desired here, actually, to translate it literally. But what it means really it means for Jews forbidden.

That was already there were, for example, many benches on parks. Because, again, the Nazis with their obsession with sex had that idea that maybe a German woman might sit on a park bench and then some Jewish man might sit next to her and start to some dirty business with her on that. And that was-- and so a German woman cannot be expected to sit next to a Jew on a park bench.

But whatever, that started up. And then, as I said, certain maybe some restaurants but-- and we didn't go much to restaurants anyway so. It might have--

Did you-- did you know about the book-- that huge book burning earlier?

At that time, I don't remember it. I remember, obviously, having heard about it. But that happened, I think, in '33 or '34. And I was 10 or 11 years old then. So--

So your family insulated you to the extent that you weren't particularly distressed or fearful.

That's correct, yeah.

Could you sense any change in your parents or, I don't know, relatives or friends?

Yeah. Oh yeah, I mean that I should mention. I mean there was a stream of people who emigrated, you know, some uncle, some cousin. You know, there was well and always the farewells. And friends of mine, the parents emigrated.



And of course, the kid then went along. I should say I had a best friend in the-- this Adass Jisroel school. He was a boy, a very interesting boy.

In fact, we became best friends initially because we both were new in that class but from totally different background. He came-- his parents had moved from Vienna to Berlin. They were Austrian Jews. But the parents were, of course, born before World War I, like all of our parents. And before World War I, the Austria Hungarian Empire included southern Poland and particularly most of Galicia, in Poland.

And his parents actually were orthodox Jews from Galicia, who had, however, left there I think before the war already, had settled in Vienna. And so they were then by citizenship, they were-- they were Austrian Jews. And they came to Berlin. It might sound strange, since Austria at that time was still a democracy. But his father had some business. I think, he sort of administered buildings.

And as an Austrian, he was not subject. He was a foreigner. Foreign Jews were not subject to all these anti-Semitic laws. And so we-- and in fact, I-- that was, this friend also influenced me in that. And then I took him also to services, to a liberal synagogue with the organ. And he found that very impressive. And so we influenced each other. And we stuck together.

He was a very bright boy. And on the 13th of March 1938, that was the day Hitler marched into Austria. I never forget that. I visited him. I saw his father sit in the dining room with his head in his hands like that and crying. Because he knew that his game was up now. Now, he was also German and subject to all the laws.

And to see a father cry is a incredibly powerful experience for-- and also a devastating experience for a boy, totally devastating. And then the parents then finally decided to send their boy out to England. As you may know, the England had relatively liberal immigration for Jewish children.

And they [INAUDIBLE]. They were, of course, orthodox. And they enrolled him in a yeshiva in Scotland and ostensibly for him to become a rabbi, which he never did. But that was the rules under which he could get out and into England. And that was actually the first personal blow in my life. And also for that reason, I never forgot the date. It was January 18, 1938.

And I was at the railroad station together with his parents, of course, to say goodbye. And he was my best friend. And I had lost him. And, but of course, the year 1938 then had many other horrible things happening. I mentioned the arrest and deportation of the Polish Jews. And then, just a few weeks later, two or three weeks later, came the infamous Kristallnacht pogrom. Of course, the two events were not unrelated.

Among the people who were arbitrarily arrested and shipped to Poland was an elderly couple, Greenspan, who entered. And the Poles, of course, claimed they didn't know what to do with all those Jews, so they put them into camps in inhuman conditions. And they had lived in Germany, I'm not sure whether in Berlin or some other city.

Anyway, they had a son, Herschel, whom they had sent to Paris to relatives because it became-- Berlin became too oppressive. And he lived with an uncle in Paris. And when the parent-- when the parents wrote to him a letter of desperation, and he became so furious. He obtained a gun and decided to assassinate the German ambassador to Paris.

But, you know, if a 16-year-old boy enters an embassy and says he wants to talk to the ambassador, that's not whom he's going to see, obviously. And so they ushered him in to some underling, some consular secretary or someone. His name was Ernst vom Rath. And history probably would never know him if it hadn't been for Grynszpan to pull his pistol and assassinate him there.

And the German government, on the other hand, used that as a pretext to stage these pogroms. And that was a starting at night from November 9th to 10th for several days. I mean, synagogues were burned. Jewish shops and now, of course, you see, since the Jewish shops all had to be labeled with the names of the owner, it never said Jewish shop.

But it was known that the stores which had the name of the author, of the owner in this particular prescribed way these

were the Jewish stores. So it was clear for the mob which windows to smash and loot. And--

What were you doing during the time of Kristallnacht? What were you-- what did you see?

Yeah. I am-- on that day in the morning, where we lived there were, at least on my way to the whatever, what's it called, the station that I had to take a commuter train to-- into the city to that school, I didn't pass any shops. They were all just apartment houses. So I knew nothing. That was the morning of the 10th now. It was a Thursday.

So I took the train. And I went to school. And as soon as I was in the school, I realized what was then-- first of all, many kids weren't there. And those who were there told horror stories of passing shops that had been smashed and looted. And then the next thing that was unusual is that, you know, the school day starts at 8:00 sharp. The bell is ringing.

And then the normal thing would be that the teacher would appear at the crack of the bell. Well, no teacher, not just in our class but in the neighboring, in no class any teacher was to be seen. And after some time, I don't remember, it was half an hour or whatever. All the teachers came from the teacher's conference then with the following instructions, that there was unrest all over Berlin. And the safety of the school cannot be guaranteed.

And furthermore, we should go home. But we should go home alone. If we go in groups, that might attract mobs. And just a single boy can sort of slip under unrecognized. And also, we should not go to friends. Because our parents might get worried. We should only go at the shortest way and fastest way home, so the parents know we are safe. And there won't be any school for the time being. We'll be notified when the school will start up again.

And then--

So you went home?

Yes. The commuter train was an elevated train. And it passed by the synagogue where-- sorry-- where I had my bar mitzvah. And what I saw there was really one of the worst horrible shocks in my life. I-- it was a beautiful building with huge, three huge domes sort of in Moorish style. And from the central dome came a huge thick column of smoke.

And when I saw that, I became so obsessed that I forgot the warning that was given to us to go straight home. At the next train stop, I left the train. And I raced back to the building and to the synagogue. And what I saw there is there was a mob of people across the street held back by a police line.

And the fire department was there, hosing down adjacent buildings so to prevent the flames from doing damage to German property. And no hose was directed at the synagogue. And that-- I just stood there. I was-- I was totally sort of hypnotized almost by it. That was something. That I couldn't even imagine that something like that could happen.

And-- and then there were many anti-Semitic sort of shouts from the mob. I mean like, I don't know, like throw out the Jews or kill the Jews. And it never occurred to me that I was one and in the middle of that mob. And then suddenly somebody said that in the house against which the mob was sort of standing looking at the synagogue, on the ground floor, somebody knew there was a Jew living.

So there were immediate shouts, let's get him. And then the mob turned its back to the synagogue and was [? open ?] to the house itself. And then I heard sort of heavy blows against the apartment door. And I was way outside. I couldn't see what's happening there. And all I could think was I hope that the door is going to hold.

And I remember that was sort of as if I was trying to influence the door to hold. But of course, it didn't. And I could hear sort of splintering wood. And then after that, there was total silence. It lasted for minutes, not a sound. And then I heard again shouts, like get him, get him. And then there was an elderly man at home.

All I remember seeing, he had a huge bald head. He was probably 60 or I don't know how old he was. And then from all sides, there were blows and at his face soon was completely bloodied. And suddenly there was a young man who shouted, you cowards, so many all fighting against one single guy. And then some others tried to attack that man and

sort of pushed him away.

And then once he was pushed through the crowd, there was police already waiting in the car as if this was all staged. I have no idea. And he was pushed awfully into the car and the police drove him off. And after I saw that, I turned around and went back to the train and went home.

So the year 1938 was really, for me, was a big turning point. It started out with the emigration of my best friend, which was a tremendous personal loss for me, then the arrest of the Polish Jews, [BLOWING NOSE] where I also knew quite a number, including some of my teachers, and then the Kristallnacht. So I stayed home as we were told on Friday.

And on Saturday, one of my friends had a birthday party that already was long planned. And so I went there. And we had hardly come there when somebody, I think one of the boys, came in saying that his father had just been arrested by the Gestapo. And that the-- and that the Gestapo is arresting Jewish men. So the party never took place.

We all immediately raced. In those days, Saturday was a weekday. So my father was in his office. And actually, it was not too far. It was several blocks from where the birthday party was supposed to take place. So I raced to his office. And just when I came in, he said he had just received an urgent telephone call from a colleague, a German, I mean, Aryan colleague, to see him immediately on an important matter. And he asked me to come along.

I was at that time 16 years old. And so we went to that colleague. It was two blocks from my father's office. And it was a certain Dr K&Auml;1/4lz. He was a few years somewhat younger than my father. And his father, Dr K&Auml;1/4lz father, had also himself been lawyer. But more importantly, he had been minister of the interior in one of the pre-Hitler governments of the Weimar Republic.

And in Germany, like I think in many European countries, the police is within the interior ministry, sort of an agency, I mean, like somewhat comparable to the FBI here, which is in the Justice Department. But there the police, the entire police organization is national. It's not local like in this country. And anyway, the father still had close contacts to high police official and had learned, therefore, of this action against-- for the arrest of Jewish men.

And in those days also everybody was paranoid but probably was justification that the Gestapo was listening on telephone calls. So therefore, the son, who my father actually knew the son better than the father, had I think done legal cases together with him. And the son did not say anything over the phone, just told my father to see him in his office on an important matter.

And my father then was ushered in and asked me to stay outside of the waiting room. And they were quite a time together there. And then they came out again. Then my father told me that that lawyer had warned him not to go back to his office or, of course, not to his home apartment and to-- it is safe, however, to stay at places where there are no Jewish males.

Well, fortunately, my father's sister, who was a widow, and she had three children, two daughters and a son. One daughter had already emigrated to Argentina. And the son had just left a few months or so before Kristallnacht also for Argentina. So it was just his sister and their remaining daughter. So in other words, there were no males in that household.

So my father immediately went there. The Gestapo came both to our apartment and also to the office to inquire. And of course, we told them he left and didn't tell us where he was going. And in those days, the Gestapo still took these relatively stupid excuses and just reappeared a few random times, maybe hoping to catch him but didn't.

And that was the second great stroke of luck that my father had after having been permitted to practice law. The thing was that the Gestapo immediately let it be known, yeah, those Jews who were arrested were put into concentration camps, for the Berlin Jews mainly in the camp Sachsenhausen, which is north of Berlin. And the treatment, of course, was horrible, full of sadism and physical brutality.

However, in those days at least, there were no killing, no mass killings. I think a few Jews actually did die off due to just

mistreatment, I mean, which is horrible enough in it's own right. But at least, most survived. And the Gestapo let it be known that anyone who's family can produce an immigration visa to another country will be immediately released and will have to leave the country within one month, giving him one month's time to wind up affairs and so on.

So but as I said, my father was lucky he was warned. He was never arrested. And of course, a Jewish relief organizations forms the Joint here in America to the local ones in Germany now put high pressure on and the first priority to get those Jews immigration visas to somewhere, anywhere in the world, just to get them out. I mean, those who were in concentration camps, to save their lives to get them out. So--

Was there-- was there a strong Nazi presence in the streets? I mean, were there marches?

Oh yeah.

Were there Gestapo?

Oh yeah, yeah. I mean, that is-- no, Gestapo, by its very nature, is a secret police. They weren't civilian. And they were, I mean, not conspicuous, even though they themselves were everywhere. And they had a whole army of informers who were not actually Gestapo but reported to them. And that was a network, so all Germany.

I mean maybe I neglected to say that that belongs much earlier. As soon as Hitler assumed power, there were frequent marches by the SA around. They had a fascination with marches, as I said. This Mommsen Gymnasium, after that Nazi officer took over, one of the things he introduced, as I explained, was that during the lunch hour, after eating lunch, we always marched onto streets singing songs.

But the SA, at every whatever occasion and even no occasion, they would march around. And one of their favorite songs, incidentally, was [GERMAN] from [GERMAN] which translated means, if Jewish blood squirts from the knives, then things will go quite as well. I mean to sing a song like that, I mean, I listened to it even at that time.

But the older I get, the more incredible it seems to me that somebody, I mean, even who hates someone, to sing-- makes that into a song is so unbelievable that it defies description. Another song which was their favorite was, I'll say it in German first. [GERMAN]

That means, we will continue to march. And even if everything breaks down and falls into pieces, because today Germany belongs to us and tomorrow the entire world. And so the-- and then they had all kinds of other songs, obviously. I mean, these are the things that I never forgot.

So even if you were insulated, this had to be fairly alarming.

Yeah, somehow I was-- I mean, I found it-- I mean, there were other things that were alarming also. There was a weekly newspaper called Der StÄ¼rmer, as well as the [GERMAN]. Maybe you heard of it. It was published by the Nazi governor of the province of Franconia, a man named Julius Streicher, which was full of anti-Semitic articles and also totally fixated on the sexual aspect of anti-Semitism.

The paper, I mean, that apparently according to that, Jews had infinite sexual appetites and particularly for little innocent blonde German girls to seduce them. That was somehow a Jewish command to do that. I mean, this is just incredible. I mean probably the man must have been sick himself who-- well, whoever holds these stories. And of course, you know, sometimes they were truth. They would intermix it with some true stories.

You know, sometimes a Jew was convicted of some crime. Usually, the crimes Jews were convicted of were such things as smuggling money out. In Germany, foreign exchange was strictly controlled. Because the whole economy was managed and controlled. And but, you know, Jews, rather than letting the Nazis take it all away from them, sometimes tried to smuggle some money out.

And in some cases, they succeeded. In other cases, they were caught. And that was then always touted as a big crime

against the German nation. That's a Jew. And of course, the story always was that the Jew, they came with nothing. And now, they are rich. So that is all just taken away from the-- from the Germans. And you know, there's stories like that.

And then, of course, there were also true stories of where a Jew somehow was caught having had a relationship with a non-Jewish girl. And if that happened, then the Jew usually was then came to a concentration camp. And those Jews who were there for-- there was actually a term, a German term, for that which translated means that of defilement of the race.

And they were mercilessly tortured and punished and usually, if they weren't shot outright, just died of torture. So that newspaper was not just sold in newsstands but they had sort of display cases on very strategic points, like on busy railroad stations and so on. And usually, I ignored it. But sometimes I sort of went and read it. And somehow I did not relate it to me. It's a funny thing.

But, yeah, and then of course there were--

Let's stop here.

Yeah, OK.