

# Carl Schwabe on his Life in Germany before Hitler Came to Power (Retrospective Account, 1939)

## Abstract

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Carl Schwabe (1891-1967) was a Jewish businessman in Hanau (Hesse). His father ran the Kahn department store in the city together with a partner, and Carl Schwabe later joined the company and managed it in the 1920s and 1930s. Due to the antisemitic boycotts and legislation of the National Socialists, the department store increasingly ran into economic difficulties from 1933 onwards. Carl Schwabe eventually sold the company in 1938. After the November pogroms, Schwabe was imprisoned in the Buchenwald concentration camp for a month. After his release, he and his family emigrated first to London in 1939 and then to the United States in 1940. Carl's brother, Otto Schwabe, who worked as a doctor in private practice in Hanau, was denounced in 1937 and arrested by the Gestapo. He died under unexplained circumstances.

In 1939, Carl Schwabe wrote an account of his experiences in Germany before and after 1933 for the Harvard History Prize Competition. In this excerpt, he describes his situation at the end of the 1920s. The improved economic situation after the end of hyperinflation, as Schwabe reports right at the beginning of the excerpt, also led to increased competition between retailers and department stores in Hanau. Apart from this, Schwabe paints a picture of a stable social network and a lively cultural landscape in which he and his family were integrated. However, he also describes another side of the "Golden Twenties" in the Weimar Republic: his business trips to Berlin also took him to the cramped and rough working-class and industrial districts of the city, as they existed in many other places in the country as well.

## Source

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[...]

We could not escape the spirit of the times. We believed we could maintain our rank by providing better facilities for display and by better furnishing of the salesrooms, as well as through a larger stock. Thus, in the year 1928 we completely rebuilt our main store. I took out a mortgage and thought that in this way I was financially strong enough for any eventuality. My partner suffered a stroke, and thus, unfortunately, just at that time I lost his valuable help and experience. With my new partner, his son-in-law, I did not get along at all. Soon serious disagreements arose and I had to part with him. He left the firm. Since Herr S. was no longer active, I concluded a new contract with him, which assured him a definite income, independent of the progress of business. At the start, all went well. The new display window did, in fact, bring new costumers. The department stores opened, prices were lowered, and the stiff competition made itself felt. Despite all, at first sales remained unimpaired. I was considering merger plans with several other firms. Thus passed the year 1929.

In spite of all the struggle, excitement, and worries we had a beautiful family life and felt happy and strong. My wife was healthy. Our little boy lived in his green garden in a child's paradise. The large sand pile we had heaped up for him attracted playmates, and he always had merry company. My brother had established a good practice, which was constantly growing. He was much more content now than earlier. He was especially very popular among the simpler people. They knew that for Dr. Schwabe no hour was too late and no distance too far if he was needed.

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A new arts society had formed and brought much stimulation through slide lectures, concerts, and other events. Jewish academicians who had settled in Hanau after the war played a leading role. We bought our first radio: unforgettable the excitement and the delight of hearing an opera from Budapest the first time-it was Gounod's Faust. The radio those days was still completely un-political, and the programs stressed the realistic portrayals in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. Remarque published his *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Jakob Wassermann's wonderful novels of social criticism appeared: Hermann Hesse, Werfel, the Zweigs, and many others came out with new works and were widely read.

I went to Berlin often, frequently accompanied by my wife. Many new firms had opened, which did not simplify buying. The intention was to offer a constantly greater selection; every firm tried to specialize in a very particular type of wares. Berlin was trying to outdo itself. Besides Max Reinhardt, other theaters, too, presented brilliant performances. Popular writers who were soon forgotten and classics were produced with equal care. Revues, patterned after French and American models, displayed more and more pageantry and scantier and scantier costumes. We had relatives in Berlin and in the summer we frequently went on drives with them to the magnificent Berlin surroundings. I showed Lotte Sanssouci and the Havel lakes; we drove to Wannsee and also to Treptow, where the Berlin workers celebrate their Sundays. A different Berlin, Berlin E. There the furniture industry is located. There, too, I had to do buying. There were no showy streets there, but instead huge factories and warehouses, endless tenement houses with sunless courtyards. Countless children romped about in the street; everywhere there was noise and dust. One felt that there people *worked*. A different tone prevailed than in the West, coarser and more masculine. There was no elegance anywhere. In the stores only the cheapest, simplest selection. When I went back to my hotel, I was once again in another world.

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Source: *Jewish Life in Germany, Memoirs from Three Centuries*, edited by Monika Richarz. Translated by Stella P. Rosenfeld and Sidney Rosenfeld. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991, pp. 326–27. Original German manuscript available at:  
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