

Jewish Life in the Weimar Republic: Oral History

Interview with Eric Livingston (1990/1991)

Abstract

Born Erich Loewenstein in 1898 in Wuppertal, a textile-manufacturing city just south of the Ruhr industrial region, Eric Livingston grew up in a very well-off and, by his own words, “well-assimilated” Jewish family that embraced its German identity. His father owned a lace factory and served on the local chamber of commerce, while his mother participated in a patriotic women’s organization that supported wounded veterans and families in need.

In 1916, Livingston volunteered for military service. He received not only an Iron Cross, but also a nomination to officers’ training school, where he experienced the end of the war and the November Revolution. The latter alarmed him, because it evoked, as Livingston put it, parallels to “the communists at the time in Russia.” A unit of revolutionary German soldiers actually placed him and his fellow trainees under arrest, because, as officers-to-be, they represented the forces of the old social order. Livingston only returned home four months later, in March 1919.

Livingston’s father wanted him to join the family business immediately, but Livingston chose instead to study engineering at a polytechnic school. While there, he embraced the social and sexual liberation of the early 1920s. He particularly remembered dance tournaments being all the rage, and Livingston fondly recalled winning ten of them in one year with his partner—a non-Jewish woman from Vienna—whom he drove from contest to contest on his motorcycle.

After school, Livingston found a job installing air-conditioning systems in coal mines. When his father died in 1924, however, the family expected Livingston to take over his father’s lace business. Livingston discovered that his father had lost most of his money during the devastating 1923 hyperinflation, but he had maintained the factory, its machinery, and the firm’s good credit, which Livingston used to secure a loan and rebuild. He also described the persistence of older ways of manufacturing, even in the interwar period, noting that his company still employed around 700 *Heimarbeiter*, employees who worked in their homes, coming to the factory only to pick up raw materials and drop off finished goods. After marrying his childhood sweetheart, Grete Stern, in 1925, Livingston also inherited her family’s ribbon factory. The USHMM website has preserved two interviews with Eric Livingston—a 2-hour video, recorded on December 13, 1990, and a transcript of an interview on February 21, 1991. In the transcript of the February 21, 1991 interview—available by clicking the link below the video of the December 13, 1990, interview—he recalled the years 1925–1930 as an economic boom, when “both factories were running... full blast,” and he could easily repay his loan of half a million RM. Here, Livingston also talked about antisemitism in the 1920s. He did not recall encountering any of it directly, but he knew the pernicious lies and stereotypes that circulated at the time, including that “these antisemites spread lies that Jews were not fighting in the war [World War I].” He also recalls his impressions of Hindenburg, Hitler, and the increasing post-1933 legal and social restrictions on German Jews. He, his wife and their two young daughters managed to emigrate to the United States after the November 9, 1938, pogrom known as “*Kristallnacht*” in English, but his mother and mother-in-law remained in Germany and were murdered in the Holocaust.

Source

Livingston: ☒One incident happened, we were out in the trenches again and there was shooting, and we had to hop into another trench there. I was a second lieutenant and had a group of three, four men with me.

And in this other trench, it was so different. We didn't know where we were. It was a trench close to us, and we came and said, did you hear voices there? Yeah, there was a cave or a hole in the trench, and we had our guns, our flashlights. This was dark and there were five Frenchmen. I say "Hands up or I'll shoot!"

And they got a shock, and they were trembling. I said, "No, come on back to the headquarters." And they were trembling, "Don't shoot, don't shoot." Okay. We brought them to the headquarters, and they were out of a French trench. We were in. We were in a long trench there, but they were so grateful, they commended me and I got the Iron Cross. So all this I was part of, and they sent me to the officer training corps, and that officer training corps was in Gumbinnen, in East Prussia, near the Russians. So we had to travel all through Germany to the officer's training corps where we were trained to become captains or majors or something.

And that was in August [19]18. I was there maybe for two or three weeks only, but suddenly Germany was defeated, and the communists took over. There were the communistic revolts all over. The Kaiser fled to Holland, and he had promised us "Das Vaterland wird Euch dankbar sein, es wird euch nicht vergessen." The Fatherland will never forget you. And we were the officers there and I said, "The war is over, let's go home."

Then the communistic *Soldatenrat* came [and said] "You can't go home," [they had] machine guns and stood in front of our barracks. "You are the traitors of the communistic ideas. You are the officers." They didn't let us go. We had to stay there. I only came home in March [19]19. I was there for another four months. "Das Vaterland wird euch dankbar sein!"

Now, all this, I told you to give you the background a little of what I was doing or how I was brought up, in which sense my, my mother came out a very fine family and she was very active with the Vaterländischer Frauenverein.

What is that? That's a welfare organization, like the United Way here, she was on the board there. My father was, years ago, in the beginning of 1900, president of the Chamber of Commerce.

I didn't want to get into the business of weaving. I wanted to be an engineer. So after I came home from the war, he said, "What do you want to do?" I say, "I want to become an engineer." "But first," my father said, "you have to learn about business no matter what you do." So he put me in the high school for commerce for one year, which didn't do any harm.

I don't know whether I mentioned it before, in school, if you are only nine years in *Gymnasium* or *Realgymnasium*, you have another privilege, you only will be drafted to the army for one year. That means if you went for nine years to the *Gymnasium*, you were only drafted one year, if you went to public schools, [you were drafted for] two years, three years, five. And the same with the taxes you had to pay and the votes you had. So that means I had to serve in the army for one year, I had good grades all over, and in the meantime, the war and then, I went to the high school of commerce. When I graduated from there, he said, "Don't you want to come to me? I have only the one son." I said, "No, I'd like to be an engineer."

So I went to the high school. Here it would be like MIT, polytechnic, for another three years. I didn't learn much, but it was a wonderful, interesting time for me.

Do you want to hear any private things from then? It was nice.

My *intimus major* [best friend], [in] the same *Pension*, same boarding house, was Johannes Bahlsen, we lived together. He's the son of the owner of Bahlsen Cakes in Hannover, like Nabisco here. And we we loved the same girls and we did everything together. I had my girl too. I had a very nice girl and at that time I liked to dance, and she was like a ballerina. In those years, 1921, 1922, all over Germany there were dance tournaments, and we were good at tango and at waltz. And I had an NSU, this is a motorcycle at the time, and on weekends she was sitting in back there, I in front. We went wherever there was a big tournament. We went and in one year we got 10 prizes. The prize was number one, an honor, and number two a silver cigarette box or a bronze lion, and it was engraved with "first place, tango, second place," and so on.

I'll mention that too. She was a lovely girl. She was born in Vienna, in Austria. But they lived in Germany at that time, near Chemnitz. Her father was a wood sculptor, [he carved] heads and furniture. Very, very fine people. Now, I graduated; to make a long story short, we kept in touch. I got married to my darling wife and she got married to a Mr. Kubitschek or something and went back to Vienna.

Question: Was she Jewish?

Livingston: No.

Question: Was any notice taken during those years or the fact that you were Jewish?

Livingston: Nothing, there was no difference. Nothing. No.

When my father died, I had to stop the ideas. I was working in a factory where we made air conditioning for coal mines, and I worked as a young engineer in the coal mines. Not getting coal but to put the air conditioning right, it was quite interesting, and I liked it. Then my father died. I was the only son, I had to take over.

Question: What business was that?

Livingston: The lace factory. Wuppertal, as I mentioned before, is known all over for the ribbon manufacturing, lace manufacturing, and chemicals. These are the three things. And he had built his lace factory, I think in [18]85 or [18]80, and father died in 1924, and then I had to take over.

It was a big place. In fact, the factory was not in Elberfeld, it was in Barmen. It is all [part of] Wuppertal now. The factory was very big, one block. And it worked out fine because it was after the inflation, we had that heavy inflation and the money had no value anymore. And if you didn't watch out – and my father didn't watch out, I'm sorry to say – there was nothing left but the machinery and the building. There was no money and no core material, so I had to start from that base, but I worked it up. Our reputation was very high. I got a very good credit from the Dresdner Bank at that time. I worked it up and a few years later I got married to my, what shall I say, love from childhood. Our parents were also very friendly, and I got married in 1925 to Grete Stern. Her maiden name was Stern. I have pictures here.

Question: Was she Jewish also?

Livingston: Oh, yeah. Yeah. She's Jewish

Two years... She has a younger brother, or had a younger brother, He passed away in the winter. And her father, who was a very good businessman, he had a ribbon factory. We made laces and they, her father made ribbons. I have the pictures if you want to see them later.

Interviewer: We'll look at them all at the end.

Livingston: Alright. My brother-in-law was still only 14, 15 years old at the time when my father-in-law died. So who was there to take over? Eric. So I had two factories, in fact, and, and also an import house of wool and silks of my father. So I had three things. We had a lot of home workers. *Heimarbeiter* we called them. They picked up their raw material on a Saturday, took it home, they got the design, how it should come out, and then next week they bought the laces or the ribbons in and got paid for it for the work. That was the main thing, and with those home workers – and we certainly had workers in our factories too – we had up to 700 people employed. We were well known, or I was well known and it was gratifying, very much so.

When Hitler came to power, I said, it's impossible. A man with these ideas – superior race, “Am deutschen Wesen wird die Welt genesen,” that means, it was this slogan, “on the German soul, the entire world will improve.” It will be cured through the German soul. The entire world will be cured. It was nonsense, but he played up to the German instinct: the uniform, the superior... and he promised these...mugs, let's call them. They were not ready to work or not willing to work. [He promised them] You are the superior race, you will rule. And he founded his SA and gave them uniforms. They never had seen a horse, but he gave them leather boots with spurs and his private *Schutzstaffel*,

I don't know how to translate it. SS black shirts. [Skull and] crossbones, also boots and horse whips.

And with those they marched through the streets. And they thought already because of this, they could rule and say whatever's necessary or whatever they want to.

[...]

Source: Oral history interview with Eric Livingston, December 13, 1990, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, Gift of Jewish Family and Children's Services of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties. Digitized video recording, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn512358>

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