

# Jewish Life in the Weimar Republic: Oral History Interview with Jeanette Rothschild (Excerpt, 1997)

## Abstract

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In this interview, Jeanette Rothschild—born Jeanette Fernbacher in 1898—describes a very happy childhood, during which she does not recall having experienced a single instance of antisemitism. When Rothschild was 4, her family moved from Grossmannsdorf near Würzburg in northern Bavaria to the town of Straubing, further to the southeast. Her father and his three brothers ran the family cattle-trading business, procuring cows and horses for a number of customers, including local elites and prominent aristocrats.

Rothschild attended a Catholic school, along with three or four other Jewish girls. She has no memories of discrimination from her friends or teachers while the school was clearly aware of her Jewishness. As a 16-year-old, Rothschild experienced the outbreak of World War I in August 1914 and remembers the immediate notice that Straubing's first young man had fallen in combat, the son of a Jewish family in town. Rothschild emphasizes in the interview that none of the announcements at the time mentioned this man's Jewishness. She seems to frame this as suggesting a larger atmosphere of acceptance and national unity—akin to the Kaiser's proclamation, "Ich kenne nur noch Deutsche" (I perceive only Germans)—but the absence of such mentions may also have contributed to the emergence, by 1916, of false and pernicious rumors that German Jews had disproportionately avoided military combat. Postwar Straubing did, indeed, seem more antisemitic to Rothschild than the prewar town of her memory. She lived in Berlin at the time, having moved there with her husband. Rothschild mentions, almost parenthetically, that she had met her husband in 1920 in the spa town of Bad Brückenau, where both of their families stayed in "Jewish hotels, of course," an allusion to the formal and informal segregation that persisted in vacation communities, in particular, in the Weimar Republic. About her comfortable life in Berlin with her husband, who made and sold women's underwear in a small chain of shops, Rothschild zeroes in on their beautiful apartment in the elegant western part of the city.

In contrast to Straubing, where she had regular contact with non-Jews in school and specifically recalled two close Christian friends, Rothschild and her husband seemed to have lived in a more Jewish milieu in Berlin, the shops' diverse customer base notwithstanding. One of the city's main synagogues stood just a block from her doorstep, and she noted that her circle of Berlin friends was "all Jewish. Only one Gentile."

Her husband continued to operate their business after 1933, but the couple experienced increasing discrimination and violence. Shortly after the November 9, 1938 pogrom known as "*Kristallnacht*" in English, Jeanette and her husband emigrated to the UK and later to the U.S.

## Source

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Excerpt of an oral history interview with Jeanette Rothschild (JR) conducted by Jerry Freimark (JF), July 24, 1997, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, Gift of the Gratz College Holocaust Oral History Archive. Digitized audio recording, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn566495>

Excerpt from the original transcript

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Excerpt begins at minute 16:20

JF: You met your husband after the war? What was his first name?

JR: Richard Abbe. Richard.

JF: Did he have to go in the war, too?

JR: No, he didn't go. His brother died and he said that he couldn't go and all kind of stuff. He was a real faker. He didn't want to go.

JF: Did his brother die of natural causes?

JR: No, in the war.

JF: Oh, in the war. His brother died in the war.

JR: His brother Ditmar. Ditmar is his name. He died in France.

JF: You got married then in 1920?

JR: In 1920. I moved to Berlin. JF: Why did you move to Berlin?

JR: Because my husband lived in Berlin. He was a Berliner.

JF: A born Berliner?

JR: No.

JF: What was his business?

JR: First, when I married him, he was a traveling salesman for a big firm. When we got married, he opened a store in Berlin for ladies' underwear. We manufactured that.

JF: He was a manufacturer, and he had a retail store?

JR: That's right, several [retail stores].

JF: Where did you live in Berlin?

JR: Fasanenstraße am Kurfürstendamm.

JF: Near the big synagogue?

JR: Yes, the next street. Here is the synagogue Fasanenstraße. Here is the Kurfürstendamm, and we-- an der anderen Seite [on the other side, across the street] we lived on the next corner.

JF: That was a very good section.

JR: Yes, one of the best.

JF: You had an apartment? Everybody had apartments.

JR: A beautiful apartment. My nephew Peter said, he always said, we had the finest bathroom. You could

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go down steps to the bath and all that. That's all forgotten.

JF: No, shouldn't be forgotten. It's nice to remember.

JR: I remember everything vividly. We had a beautiful apartment and everything. Nothing missing.

JF: How about Berlin? Did you have many friends?

JR: Not too many, but good friends.

JF: Mostly Jewish, in Jewish circles?

JR: All Jewish. Only one Gentile. He was here from my hometown, from Straubing. He was the director with General Electric, his name was Habenecker.

JF: [unclear]

JR: This man, the Jewish man they murdered. That was because he was a Jew. [Rathenau] it was already by that time [antisemitism]. Later on. He was a director of that. Not Hitler yet. Rathenau.

JF: He had converted?

JR: No, he didn't go to synagogue. But his sisters bought in our stores. I remember that.

JF: I had the switch off. Would you repeat that for me? You moved to Straubing.

JR: When I was four years old, we moved there, to Straubing, and I grew up there.

JF: And you said, you didn't notice antisemitism in Berlin, but when you went home to Straubing...?

JR: Yes, well then I was visiting my parents in the 1920s, when it just started. I didn't in Berlin, no. In Berlin nobody knew you. I mean, it is a big city just like you would go in Philadelphia. In a small town, when I came there. Of course, my so-called friends, they looked to the side. My school friends, they weren't so friendly anymore. Only several. Not everybody.

JF: So you would say, about 1924? You didn't get any trouble in Berlin until 1933?

JR: No, we didn't have any trouble.

JF: And then what happened when the Nazis came in?

JR: It was on that day, 1933, they had the Nazis in front of the stores and who wanted to come in, they didn't want to let them in. I remember, there was a customer of ours, she lived nearby, her name was Erika Glässner. She was a *Schauspielerin* [actress], very famous at that time. She was a customer of ours, came in. We befriended people there. She said, what do you want, I go where I want to go, Jewish or not.

JF: So, you could keep your stores?

JR: Yes, we kept our stores, very successful, 'till that Kristallnacht.

[...]

End of excerpt.

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You can access the full transcript from the USHMM record,  
<https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn566495>

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