

# Jewish Life in Weimar Germany: Oral History Interview with Ernest Fontheim (Excerpt, 1997)

## Abstract

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Ernest Fontheim focuses primarily on his experiences as a young German Jew after the Nazi seizure of power in 1933, but he lived the first ten years of his life under the Weimar Republic and makes direct and oblique references to he and his family's pre-1933 lives.

Fontheim describes his Berlin upbringing as “relatively well-off,” noting that his family employed a live-in maid and took annual summer vacations. He grew up in an atmosphere typical of the era's Bildungsbürgertum— the German social class that valued cultural education and domestic order—as indicated by his mother's French education and his father's library of great works, including a 54-volume set of Goethe's writings. Fontheim also recalls his family as quite secular and “completely assimilated in... the German way of life” prior to 1933, which included Christmas celebrations that seemed to overshadow those of the high Jewish holidays. Later, after tightening Nazi policies had forced him into an Orthodox Jewish school in 1934, Fontheim's unfamiliarity with Hebrew and basic Jewish concepts shocked his teachers.

Despite his relatively secular childhood, Fontheim insisted, “I knew that I was Jewish,” and he suggests that non-Jewish Germans perceived him as such, a fact that events after Hitler's seizure of power made increasingly clear. Still, he does not remember any antisemitic remarks from his non-Jewish schoolmates, even during the early months of the regime. One friend even gave Fontheim a Hitler Youth pennant, which he proudly waved at a family gathering, much to his mother's horror.

Regarding politics, Fontheim shares his younger self's vague recollections of frequent German elections, during which the parties plastered placards on walls across the city. Hitler's appointment as chancellor, on the other hand, “didn't mean anything” to the 10-year-old Fontheim, but he did remember his mother talking to the family physician at great length about it, when the latter had come to check on Fontheim's recovery from Scarlet Fever on January 30, 1933. Fontheim also later observes that the older teachers seemed less susceptible to Nazi ideology than the younger ones did, a memory corroborated by historical studies highlighting the youthfulness of the NSDAP, which shaped its dynamic image and appeal since the late 1920s.

In the full interview, available on the USHMM website, Fontheim recounts his experiences during Kristallnacht (the violently antisemitic pogrom on November 9, 1938), his survival of the Holocaust, and his emigration to the United States.

## Source

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Excerpt of an oral history interview with Ernest Fontheim by Randy M. Goldman on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Oral History Branch, March 13, 1997. Digitized audio recording, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn506757>

Excerpt from the original transcript (00:00-09:32)

Excerpt begins with the interview

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

Q: 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 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 in German means really classical high school. I – that school got a new principal in the year 1934. He was a retired army colonel who had fought in 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 example for Nazi

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ideological indoctrination.

At that point, many Jewish kids were taken out of that school by their parents and sent to other schools. I stayed in. And after one year of that principal, only two kids – 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 military roll call. Behind the school building, there was a big sports field. And we assembled there and had to stand at military attention 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 [Jewish] 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 knew what he stood for, so 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 a purely Germanic or Aryan school, serving as an example 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.

[. . .]

End of excerpt.

You can access the full transcript from the USHMM record,  
<https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn506757>

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