

Jewish Life in Weimar Germany: Oral History Interview with Leo Diamantstein (1991)

Abstract

Born in Heidelberg in 1924, as the youngest of four children, Leo Diamantstein recounts only a few childhood memories of the Weimar Republic. Both of his parents had grown up in an especially diverse region of the polyglot Habsburg Empire, and Diamantstein's father, who spoke five languages, worked as a translator in the Austrian Army during World War I. Antisemitic pogroms raged in that part of east-central Europe after 1918, as new nation-states carved themselves out of the three collapsing empires. As a consequence, Diamantstein's mom and dad resolved to emigrate to the relative safety of Germany, which had emerged as both a transit point and a haven for Jews fleeing the violence further to the east.

In Germany, Diamantstein's father launched a quilting business that thrived until the Great Depression, at which point the family pulled up stakes and moved to Frankenbach, 60km to the southeast. There, his father took a job as a traveling salesman and only saw the family on weekends. His father made that weekly trip in his own car—a rarity at a time when Germany had only 4.3 cars per 1,000 people. Diamantstein liked going for rides in his dad's car, but he otherwise had bad memories of the year in Frankenbach, recalling that the neighborhood children harassed and attacked him and his siblings.

Around 1930 or 1931, the family moved to the much larger city of Frankfurt am Main, which had a thriving Jewish community and “marvelous synagogues.” Diamantstein entered Kindergarten at a Jewish school there, describing it as a very common practice in Frankfurt for Jews to attend one of the Jewish schools that the Rothschild banking family had subsidized.

Not long thereafter, in 1933, the Nazis came to power, and Diamantstein remembers encountering a group of uniformed SA or SS men marching through the streets, singing “Köpfe rollen, Juden heulen” (Heads are rolling, Jews are bawling). By 1934, Diamantstein's father had decided to get his family out of Germany, and they eventually resettled in Italy, a destination that did not require that they have a visa. After later surviving incarceration and the war, Diamantstein immigrated to the United States.

Source

Please tell us your full name.

OK. Well, Leo Diamantstein. I was born as Joseph, but I don't use that name.

Where and when were you born? When? Are you ready? Are you asking me? Where and when I was born? I was born in Germany in Heidelberg, beautiful city, on December 1, 1924.

Tell us about your parents and what your family life was like then.

My parents had emigrated from Poland, both of them. My mother was from a small town-- not that small town, according to her-- called Tarnobrzeg. And that was part, before World War I, and during part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. And Father was from another town, which is now part of the Soviet Union or maybe the Ukraine now.

And Father, as a youngster, had gone to Budapest and had learned the trade there of quilt making. And

at 18 or so, he was inducted in the Austrian army of the time. And then World War I was on. And Father spoke four or five languages. That is, he spoke Russian. He was fluent. And he knew Hungarian and a few other Slavic languages, plus German. So he became an interpreter.

And he did relatively well in surviving World War I. But since the past experiences for Jews after the war was over, to making this part brief, led him to want to leave when the war was over. Where Mother came from, on and off, the Russians had invaded. And they had suffered pogroms. And the Cossacks had come. And it was very bad.

So they decided to emigrate to Germany. And father started his quilting business there. And he did quite well. The first child died of pneumonia or something after a few months. Then my oldest brother was born a year or so later, Adolph, and then my sister, and then my other brother. And I came a few years later. And so I was the youngest. And I was and still am.

And so Father was a very skilled person. He wasn't only skilled, he was also a brilliant person. He was an expert chess player and had played in the club in Heidelberg some of the world champions in chess. And his business prospered.

And everything went well until '28, '29, when the Great Depression hit Germa OK. Well, Leo Diamantstein. I was born as Joseph, but I don't use that name.

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And everything went well until '28, '29, when the Great Depression hit Germany as well. And that destroyed, bankrupted all of Germany, and including my father. So the family had to move from Heidelberg, or Father decided.

So I mean, I was too little to know what was going on really. All I remember is his big studio, and his owl that stood on his desk, and so forth. And then we moved to a little town called Frankenbach. And Father became sort of a traveling salesman. And they had two, he did. Well, pretty soon, he was able to have an automobile that we only saw on weekends when he came home and he took us for rides.

Some of our experiences with the population were not terribly pleasant, especially as a child. I remember the other children were taking us for rides in the country. And they were harassing us and beating us up. There are some episodes I don't think that are worth telling. And I remember there was a farm across the street. And I was put on a horse the first time. And it was so high up for me that I didn't think I would ever want to go again.

After one year there, we moved to Frankfurt am Main-- Frankfurt, a big city, one of the biggest today in Germany. And that was a whole new world. And of course, Frankfurt had a large Jewish community. Frankfurt, at that time, had about half a million inhabitants, and of whom, there were about 50,000 Jews, about 10% of the population. And there were some marvelous synagogues, old synagogues.

And we became part of that Jewish community. Father did his business and did relatively well. And after some initial struggles, of which some of them I wasn't aware of, being still a small child, I remember-- excuse me-- I went to a kindergarten there, and then to school, the first grade, and so forth.

And those were all Jewish schools. 95% of the Jews went to Jewish schools. They were still around the grade till high school. And they were all basically financed by the Rothschilds, the Rothschilds, who were the family, the rich family from Frankfurt. And they sponsored all these schools. And we had marvelous schools.

And there, I made friends, especially two other children, Aaron and Jonas. Aaron Horowitz was the son of the chief rabbi in Frankfurt, who had come to Frankfurt from Hungary originally. He had 11 children. And he was one of them somewhere, or 12. And he was a very dear friend. And so was Jonas [? Alster. ?] Jonas may still be alive. Unfortunately, I cannot say the same for the Horowitz family.

When the time came, I was told-- because at that point, we were no longer in Germany. But I was told by Jonas, who managed to emigrate to the same place we did later, that he was offered free passage to what was then Palestine, where he had visited once before. And he was elated about it. But he refused to leave. He wanted to stay with his flock. And him, his 11 children, and wife all died in the gas chambers, unfortunately. It's a very sad thought for me because we are very close.

All went relatively well until 1933. That was, of course, the turning point. That was the year that Hitler came to power. He came to power, actually, fair and square, winning an election. There were a number of other right wing parties who supported him. It wasn't just the Nazi Party who thought the person that stood for law and order was their man. And he was elected.

And law and order came about. I remember distinctly, there were all these orders. You would see a group of demonstrators, other group of demonstrators. They clashed. And the police came, and so forth, and so forth. And anyway, what was maybe the model democracy in German, what used to be called the Weimar Republic, had come to an end when Hitler, shortly after he came to power, little by little, he took over. The parliament was dissolved and created his own puppet parliament. And things started to be very bad already for us.

I have a few clear memories. One was once walking down the Bleichstrasse, a street in Frankfurt. I think I was with Maurice, with my brother. A group of Nazi uniform, they were either Brownshirts or Blackshirts at that time. These were the SS Blackshirts. And they marched as beautiful and orderly as they did.

And they were singing a song. The song was "Kopfe rollen, Juden heulen," which translates, "The Heads

Are Rolling, the Jews Are Crying." I have vivid memory of that, a very vivid memory because I was shivering. How can anybody say something like that? I was, at that point, maybe seven years old. And I remember that very distinctly.

And things became worse-- Jewish people were beaten, were mistreated. I think the only bright side of all that I had, that a little youngster from the Hitler Jugend befriended us as kids. We thought, well, if he's a nice kid, why not? He seemed to know so much.

And he had this beautiful knife, hunting knife, and so forth, until one day, he got mad at us. And he started cursing us and said, we all will be killed eventually, and so on. So we got in a fight. And it was the only time that I had a physical confrontation. And he was two years older, much stronger than I am. But I did overpower him. And he was laying on the ground. That was the only good memory I had. And he jumped up, and ran off, and used all kinds of epithets about us swine Jews, and so forth.

That incident didn't repeat itself. But was common practice when we saw a bunch of kids to go to the other side of the street because there was always a good chance they would attack us. And there were always more of them than us. And they all were carrying them proudly in a Hitler Jugend uniforms, and so forth. So life became quite miserable.

I remember when Adolph, my brother, was bar mitzvah when he was 13 to become a member of the community. We belonged to this Borneplatz Synagogue. And he was in the choir. And so was Maurice. I was too young. Or maybe my voice wasn't good enough.

At any rate, we had to kind of hush rush in and out, and not be seen, and quickly go home. And it was a large synagogue, with a large group of people. Well, in 1934, my father decided that this is no life. And in fact, we had a sister of my mother that lived in Frankfurt.

And Father talked to him. And he talked about leaving. And Father said, I want to leave. I don't want to stay here. There's no future here for us. And this is something that who knows how long this lasts. Well, most of our friends, including the ones who were the owners of the house where we lived in Heidelberg-- we'd maintained the friendship-- they owned several houses. And we kept telling them that. Father and Mother, they kept telling them, there is no future here.

And they said, well, this is to pass. Nothing like that, people like the Germans are not going to stand for Hitler. So he had lost a leg in World War I fighting for Germany. He was proud of his Iron Cross. And he said, they would never touch me. Well, he found out different, unfortunately.

But father pursued. And he decided to leave. He didn't know where, so he decided whoever lets us in, that's where we're going to go. And I still remember, we had already our things packed to go to France. And at the last moment, the French decided they didn't want any more Jews. And they wouldn't let us in.

Father had a Polish passport, having been born in Poland. In Germany, it wasn't even enough to be born there, as we were born. We were not considered German. You had to be, I don't know, a certain generation before you could become a German.

Anyway, so we looked around. We had everything already. We had packed. We were going to go to France. And well, it didn't materialize. So Father started to inquire with other countries. And the only country that would let us in was Italy. They had no questions. They didn't even require a visa. They said, if you want to emigrate to Italy, we'll give you the stamp of approval. And you can come. So Father said, to Italy we go.

So in June of 1934, we packed. The condition that the Nazis put on us leaving-- and that was in most cases the case, and it started to be more so-- they said, you can leave. But you have to leave everything behind. You were not allowed to take anything with you. But you could go.

So Father decided, whatever he had, he had to abandon there. But he just had, I guess in retrospect, the right idea. And so we went. I still remember, we were singing and kind of happy about long train trip. We went through Switzerland. And they gave us the OK just to pass through, of course, not to stay.

And we went to Milan in Italy. And Milan was a beautiful, and still is, beautiful, large city. And of course, now, we arrived without a penny, without anything. So Father immediately started to look for some way to make a living. And it was very hard. I'm not that sure of all the things he tried to do and did. He couldn't start a factory. He didn't have the means to do that. So he tried to sell and to do whatever he could.

We were near a park, near the Giardini Pubblici, public gardens that had a zoo in it. And it was heaven for us kids. We didn't mind at all. And the kids didn't have-- and to the contrary, we were afraid. We stayed away from the other kids. We didn't really know what to expect.

And the other kids, the Italian kids, were just marvelous. They were all curious-- who are you? What are you? What language do you speak? So we talked to them. And they taught us Italian. Since it was middle June or so, there was vacation time. They have pretty much the same system here as far as months. Between June and September, there are no schools. By the time September came along, we knew Italian, of course, as kids, or at least to speak.

Source: Oral history interview with Leo Diamantstein, October 3, 1991, by Beverly Stahl, South Carolina Council on the Holocaust and South Carolina Educational Television. Gift to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 1995, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn505518>

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