

Reading 4A

INTERVIEWS WITH A GERMAN JEWISH FATHER FROM 1925-1945

Read each question first. Then, follow along as the text of the interview is read aloud in class. Finally, be prepared to discuss the questions.

Questions

1. Does the man in the interview see himself as German or Jewish?
2. What does the man mean when he says anti-Semitism in Germany is a “protest against poor economic conditions”?
3. Why does the man refuse to leave Germany in 1935?
4. Why do you think the man finds the events of 1935-1938 so unbelievable?
5. What is the significance of the story of the guard at Auschwitz?

(The following interview is based on actual interviews with three German Jewish victims of the Holocaust who survived. The father is a composite of the three.)

INTERVIEW WITH A GERMAN JEWISH FATHER, 1925

Q: Can you describe your family?

A: My family has lived in Berlin since 1795. My ancestors knew the great Moses Mendelssohn, the finest German Jew. My grandfather fought against the French in the Franco-Prussian War of 1871, and my father fought them in the Great War (World War I). He was decorated with the highest military honor, the Iron Cross. My older brother and uncle also fought in that war; my uncle lost a leg and my brother was blinded in a poison gas attack. Members of my family have been great German patriots devoted to the *Reich* for 125 years.

Q: What is your occupation?

A: I run the newspaper my father edited. My family and I supported Kaiser Wilhelm before the war through our newspaper, but now we feel we must give loyalty to Weimar Republic. It stands for all that is best in Germany: freedom, tolerance, reason, justice and international peace.

Q: Do you belong to a synagogue?

A: Yes. But it is a matter of personal choice. My religious persuasion is not important. I am a good German—first, last and always. A very good German.

Q: Do you think there is anti-Semitism in Germany?

A: Yes, but it is unimportant and less than anywhere else. *True* Germans are not anti-Semitic. They believe in the values of their forefathers: tolerance reason, equality, like Goethe, Lessing and Mendelssohn. Any German anti-Semitism is a protest against poor economic conditions. It will pass—this is an enlightened country, civilized and free. A land of laws and great traditions. We Germans are the most

advanced, humanitarian people on earth.

SECOND INTERVIEW WITH A GERMAN JEWISH FATHER, NOVEMBER 1935

NOTE: Between April 1933 and November 1935, the Nazi government passed many Anti-Jewish laws.

Q: With all the laws passed since 1933, how has life changed for you and your family?

A: Life under Hitler's government is more difficult for Jews. My children cannot attend the public school any more; my newspaper has been shut down; our non-Jewish friends don't see us much any more; we cannot fly the German flag; I have had to release our non-Jewish maid; and I am earning money sweeping floors.

Q: Do you think you will leave Germany?

A: No. This cannot last. Anti-Semitism has come before and gone away. Germans will not allow such discrimination for long. We are sometimes harassed on the streets by SA hoodlums, but there has been nothing like pogroms or mass violence. They are burning books, not authors. It will pass—how long can Hitler last?

THIRD INTERVIEW WITH A GERMAN JEWISH FATHER, SEPTEMBER 1938

Q: Because of the curfews and other restrictions, much more has changed in your life. For example, you are in new living quarters. Do you mind?

A: We have had to adapt and adjust to a new life. My family of four plus another family of four are living in two rooms. This has not been easy. We share a small bathroom and sleep on the floor. But we manage.

Q: What else has changed?

A: We have lost most of our savings because the government has seized Jewish bank accounts and property. Food is now rationed to us. We are forbidden to attend certain public places of entertainment; parks and public transportation are closed to us.

Q: Have you experienced any more harassment?

A: Yes. Sometimes on the streets one of us will be ridiculed, pushed or struck. The police are now under SS control, so they are usually no help. Yesterday, our neighbor was forced by some SA men to wear a sign saying he was a Jewish pig. When he went to the police, they forced him to wear a second sign saying he would never complain again.

Q: Have your attitudes about Germany changed?

A: Only about some Germans. This is unexplainable. Germany seems to have gone berserk. It is not the country I know as Germany. Violence has increased in the streets, book burnings occur regularly, people are arrested with no explanation and held indefinitely. I do not understand it. Concentration camps in the land of Goethe and Lessing? The land of Beethoven and Bach? My family does not understand. We still have hope—no one has been beaten or murdered in my family. We at least know clearly what is permitted and not permitted. They are burning books now; five hundred years ago they would have burned the authors.

FOURTH INTERVIEW WITH A GERMAN JEWISH FATHER, 1945

Q: The war is over. You are alone, that is, without your family, here in the Landsberg Displaced Persons (DP) Camp. How did you get here?

A: In January 1945 I was in Auschwitz. The Germans forced us onto the road and we ran, in the cold, for three days. I wound up at a camp called Mauthausen in Austria and from there was marched to Landsberg work camp. I was nearly dead: starving, with dysentery and lice, exhausted and even unable to get out of my bunk. I looked out the barracks window and saw a tank with a white star on it. The Americans have arrived.

Q: What did you think then?

A: No one thought any more. We were frightened or beyond fright. The Americans ordered us out. They couldn't believe their eyes—we looked like skeletons, emaciated, smelled of filth, disease, excrement and death. Some prisoners even had their flesh falling off their bones. The Americans made us strip—like the Germans had—and sprayed us with disinfectant. They fed us, gave us medical care and took down the barbed wire. Landsberg became a DP camp.

Q: Have you remained here since May?

A: No. I returned to Berlin to look for my family and then came back here.

Q: Are you alone?

A: No one is alive. In January 1942 Jews had to give up all warm clothing. My wife contracted pneumonia and died within a week. My son was taken away a few months later. He died in a slave labor camp in Poland. My brother was sent from Dachau to Auschwitz around the same time. Since he was nearly blind from his World War I experience with poison gas, he was sent immediately to the gas chamber when he arrived in Auschwitz. I believe the same gas that blinded him, or one like it, killed him at least. My uncle, who had lost a leg, was also sent to Auschwitz but died in the boxcar en route. I learned these things from people who survived Auschwitz. While we were still in Berlin, my daughter died in my arms of malnutrition in 1943, just before I was deported to Auschwitz. I had hoped my son had survived, or my brother—or someone. Now I don't know why I survived—what is left to live for?

Q: Are you angry?

A: Yes, angry—but at whom? I don't know. What good is anger, what good is life if it is lived alone?

Q: How do you feel about Germany and the Germans?

A: I don't know. A guard at Auschwitz used to discuss Goethe, the poet of humanity, and German philosophy with us. Then he would leave the discussion to “process” a train transport. That means he would go to send thousands of people to their deaths. Then he would return to our discussion. How could this be? They had gone beyond burning books and *did* burn the authors. Philosophy and mass murder? Art and medical experiments on human beings? Beethoven and gas chamber? Buchenwald concentration camp was built around the Goethe Oak where the poet used to sit and write! Germans are beasts—they are poets. How could they do it—make us so alone? I don't know. . .

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