

AT HIS EMOTIONAL SWEARING-IN as U.S. Secretary of State on September 22, 1973, Henry Kissinger declared: “There is no country in the world where it is conceivable that a man of my origin could be standing here next to the president of the United States.” Indeed, Kissinger’s parents, who had been driven out of Nazi Germany in 1938, could hardly believe that, thirty-five years later, their son had reached America’s highest appointed executive office.

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HENRY KISSINGER WAS BORN ON MAY 27, 1923 in Fürth, Germany, a town of about 70,000 residents just outside of Nuremberg. The Kissingers—Henry, his brother Walter, and parents Louis and Paula—lived a life of separation from the mainstream German community. Their social lives centered around the 2,500-member Jewish community and the area’s most Orthodox synagogue.

After enduring escalating intolerance and violence from neighbors and local Nazis alike, the family fled Germany just three months before the outbreak of anti-Jewish riots known as *Kristallnacht*. Kissinger’s maternal grandparents and about a dozen close relatives who stayed behind would die at the hands of the Nazis.

Kissinger’s first years in the United States were not exceptional. He resided in the Washington Heights section of Manhattan from 1938 to 1942, attended the local high school, and took a menial job in a brush factory to help support the family. His social life revolved around the Orthodox Jewish community and the larger German-Jewish population that dominated the neighborhood. After graduating from high school, he attended night school at City College for one year, studying to become an accountant.

But just as the Nazi rise to power forced Kissinger out of Germany, World War II pulled him out of the German-Jewish immigrant community of Washington Heights. A young man with a proven aptitude for complex analysis and practical problem-solving, he served admirably

in United States Army Counterintelligence Corps., where he acquired extensive experience in local administration, political organization, economic reconstruction, and civil-military relations—all before the age of twenty-five. This experience opened many new doors, including acceptance at Harvard, America’s premier university.

Herbert Englehardt, who lived downstairs from Kissinger in the segregated living quarters for Jews at Harvard, recounts that Kissinger was an outcast among his peers, including other immigrant Jews: “He was deadly serious all the time.”

At Harvard, Kissinger founded the International Seminar, which convened young, politically ambitious individuals from Western Europe and other non-Communist states to discuss common intellectual and governance challenges. Despite his success, he remained segregated as a Jew, never gaining access to elite clubs on campus. He did, however, find favor in the eyes of powerful American government officials, who recognized in him and other European refugees unique qualifications for policy decision making and intelligence analysis: they possessed the language skills and cultural familiarity with postwar Germany, a key battleground in the struggle against Communism. And so it was that President John F. Kennedy’s national security advisor, McGeorge Bundy, wrote to Kissinger a week after Kennedy’s inauguration: “[The] president has asked me to talk with you at your early convenience about the possibility of joining up down here. We count on having your help, particularly in the general area of weapons and policy and in the special field

of thinking about all aspects of the problem of Germany.”

During the first year of the Kennedy administration, Kissinger served as an informal adviser on American policy toward West Germany, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and nuclear strategy. He had little direct influence on policy, but became an acknowledged “policy insider,” with access to classified planning documents and to high level leaders, including

Henry, age 11, with his brother Walter, 10, in Germany, c. 1933.



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