

Translated extract from

**Götz Aly und Michael Sontheimer
Fromms
Wie der jüdische Kondomfabrikant Julius F. unter
die deutschen Räuber fiel
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**Götz Aly and Michael Sontheimer:
Fromms
How the Jewish Condom Manufacturer, Julius F.,
Got Robbed by the German Thieves**

[Translated by David Brenner]

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Julius Fromm, Sex and the Planned Family

Among the numerous relatives, there is only one person still living who knew Julius Fromm well — and she didn't like him. That's Ruth Fromm, born in 1919 in Berlin, a daughter of Julius's older brother Salomon. Petite and delicate, cheery despite her arthritis, this 87 year-old lady lives in Manhattan and speaks a wonderful old-fashioned Berlin German. She walks, for example, "across the way" (*über den Damm*) instead of "across the street" (*über die Straße*). Of course, she always switches back to English. But when talking about her diet and the dangers of the bird flu, she abruptly breaks into a lighthearted "cockle-doodle-doo." Having never had children herself, she keeps her family together, dispersed as they are "across the planet."

There's the difficult but highly intelligent nephew in Berlin and the widow of a cousin in Munich. She had to put up with a control freak of a husband. His name was Alfred, and he'd been hidden during the war in the countryside with a Christian family. Because of the way he spent his early life, he turned out to be a little—in fact, *extremely*—obsessive. Ruth, who worked as a child psychologist until the age of 77, adds: "As a psychoanalyst, you don't want to therapize away these kinds of ticks. If you try to, you run the risk that the person has nothing left to hold onto."

She can relate many stories about living as well as dead relatives in Johannesburg, Berlin, Paris, Munich and London. She likes to talk about her Aunt Helene, the most fun-loving of the seven siblings of Julius Fromm, who suddenly (and happily) became a widow. Before the war, she ran an optical shop in Berlin: "No, she wasn't at all a 'pious Helen' (*eine fromme Helene*). She knew how to steal away the men."

There's one person that Ruth doesn't talk about and hasn't saved any photos of. It's Uncle Julius. You almost have to give her the third degree to get her to talk about him. "He was cold," she says at one point. "Quite unlike the many other warm-hearted aunts and uncles. Always thinking about business, about money, about his company. Otherwise there's not much to say about him." Later we'll discuss why Ruth continues to hold a grudge. But, for now, there are a lot of stories to tell about her uncle.

For insight into the family, you can start with a public tribute, one not necessarily ever reciprocated by Julius Fromm. It came on the occasion of his fiftieth birthday in 1933, during the first weeks of the Nazi regime, in the newsletter for druggists, *Der Drogenhändler*: "It's only because of his intelligence and focused work that he stands before us as a man who we all should pay tribute to. His life's work has been ambitious and brilliantly successful. The early passing of his father meant that, as a young man, he had to make his way on his own. Through strength of will, he gave his life direction and a meaning." As a businessman, it continues, he understood how to guide the company "with a firm hand." The "colossal modern buildings" of his factory "suggest how these sites of German work have achieved recognition all over the world. Due to good publicity, a talented customer service organization, and its consistently reliable quality, the brand 'Fromm's Act' was able to gain the complete trust and satisfaction of buyers."



Julius Fromm at the end of the 1920s

Starting in World War I, but especially during the troubled early years of the Weimar Republic, people began to have a more liberated relationship to sex and the body. A symptom of this was the dance craze passed through all social classes. It was announced that the 1919 wake for murdered Communist Karl Liebknecht was to be “followed by a tea dance.” The modern science of sexuality (or “sexology”) was being pioneered outside the universities. A “new sex wave” – that is the diagnosis of historian Walter Laqueur. This extended “all the way to nude performances and soft porn.” Berlin began to copy Paris, small establishments shot up out of nowhere, and erotic books became bestsellers. If the titles are any guide, these books dealt with “harem nights,” “women and whips,” “a coquette’s apprenticeship,” “buxom ladies,” “the love letters of two boys,” “the diary of a gynecologist,” “lesbian women” (or “counter-sexual feminine eroticism”) and “vicissitudes in the Garden of Venus.”

The German Association of Office-Machine Dealers (*Reichsverband der Büromaschinenhändler*) started up a beauty contest for stenographers. And at the beginning of the 1930s, “Berlin’s latest attraction” debuted: the Sexological Bookstore (*Sexualwissenschaftliche Buchhandlung*) on Wittenbergplatz: “In huge Antiqua letters of blue and silver, the word ‘sexual’ takes hold of the observer. During the day, passersby crowd in front of the display windows.” The store’s “peculiar tone” quickly led to “multiple visits from the vice squad.” In December 1932, a court sentenced the owner to eight months in prison “for distributing morally degenerate literature.”

It was in such times that Julius Fromm introduced his “special brand.” On the one hand, the product targeted was the highly sensitive sphere of private life. On the other, the idea of using a novel, super-thin contraceptive was not considered a threat, and it had wide-ranging consequences for the entire social structure. The condom played an important role in breaking up the traditional unity of sexuality and

reproduction. It made it easier to be promiscuous, to experiment sexually, and to be erotically liberated from one's ordinary family "duties."

As a consequence, the chairman of the Fulda Bishops' Conference, Adolf Cardinal Bertram, attacked this technologically perfected contraceptive in 1921: it was a "stimulus to vice." Advertising the prophylactic would "completely obscure or destroy our nation's moral precepts," leading to a "plummeting in the birthrate" and the "loss of our nation's most virtuous strength." Magnus Hirschfeld, the co-founder of modern sexology, saw things rather differently: "There is a leading company in Berlin," he proclaimed, "which day in, day out manufactures no less than 144,000 of these prophylactics -- and can hardly keep up with demand."

Faced with ominous venereal diseases, especially syphilis, Hirschfeld explained how much misery, "how many germs and germinating humans" would be "nipped in the bud" by the use of condoms. There were few products that had "made such a deep impact on human sexual and social life" as that which had become legendary under the proud (if ambiguous) name of "Fromm's Act" ["act" in German alluding to the "sexual act"]. After touring the Fromm plant in 1926, Hirschfeld declared that "according to ethics and science, on the basis of practical experience and theory, I have come to the conclusion that the prophylactic distributed under the name of 'Fromm's Act' best fulfills the prerequisites of a device designed for protection and contraception."

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NEUE POSTANSCHRIFT:

BERLIN-CÖPENICK
FRIEDRICH/HAGENERSTR. 38/39

TELEFON: CÖPENICK 2431/34

Advertisement in a druggists newsletter, 1930

Around 1875, the birthrate in Germany began to decline modestly, a trend that quickly accelerated after the turn of the century. This was generally attributed to “the rationalization of sexual life.” In a study of that title published in 1912, economist Julius Wolf concluded that “increased knowledge in the methods of birth prevention as well as increased technological ‘progress’ and the accessibility of this knowledge has provided substantial momentum to the declining birthrate.”

At first in the cities and then in rural areas, more and more Germans changed over to the “two-child system” (and after World War I, the “one child system”), to the consternation not only of Catholic dignitaries but also many demographers and politicians. Jewish Germans were in this respect trendsetting. One reads in the *Jüdisches Lexikon (Jewish Lexicon)* of 1927: “Despite an increase in marriages of 29 percent in the last fifty years, the number of births in this period has fallen by over 43 percent.” To keep the Jewish population of Berlin at the same numbers, “an continuing influx of Jewish people from beyond the city boundaries” would be necessary.

At the beginning of the 1930s, an alliance emerged between National Socialists, intent on preserving the “strength of the nation’s youth,” and church-affiliated fundamentalists, who called for chastity and marital fidelity. The cooperation of these two groups found rather strident (if limited) expression in the person of Kurt Gerstein, himself motivated by variety of factors. Gerstein was a member of the anti-Nazi “Confessing Church” and a special agent at the rank of *Obersturmführer* in the Waffen-SS. Early on, in August of 1942, he passed along to the Swedes a highly detailed report on the death camps of Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka and Majdanek, accompanied by his request to forward the information to the Allied governments. Yet in 1936, Gerstein had written an anti-Semitic dossier on protecting the nation’s youth. In it, he made the following comments on advertising condoms: “One only has to think of its name, ‘Primeros’ (i.e., ‘First Love’) to get a general idea of the utter degeneracy which Jewish speculation and disorder have instigated. [...] In addition, there should be a law forbidding the active machine sale of these devices, which have dangerously awakened the curiosity of some young people, devices introduced in Germany by a Jewish firm.” Condoms of the brand “Primeros” were produced in Saxon-Bohemia by the firm of Emil Schuran.

In fact, it was only after long resistance that Julius Fromm succeeded in 1928 in launching the first automatic condom sales machines. He promoted them with the slogan, “Men, protect your health,” since the Social Democratic minister of justice, Gustav Radbruch, had prohibited all advertising hinting at erotic pleasure or the prevention of pregnancy. The parliamentary representative of the (largely Catholic) Center Party, “court councillor” Martin Fassbender, warned the Prussian State Legislature that such sales machines would “thoroughly overstimulate young people” with “erotic urges.”

In 1936 Gerstein composed a document about his accomplishments on the moral front. There he defended himself against dismissal from the Nazi Party, which also would have entailed dismissal from the civil service. "In addition, I would call attention to my years of resistance against Jewish-Bolshevist attacks on the potency of the German nation (*deutsche Volkskraft*). [...] The files on my years of struggle against the Jewish-Galician company pigs [*sic!*], Fromm's Act and Primeros, who distributed millions of free samples to the youngest among our youth, can be found in the offices of the Interior Ministry."

In the Weimar years, Gerstein and his comrades-in-arms had founded a small grassroots movement calling itself the "German Office of Protestant Brotherhoods for the Combat of Indecency" (or *Reichsschundkampfstelle*). They published a newsletter, *Der Schundkampf* (The Struggle against Indecency) with the intention of "prohibiting advertising for risqué books, sexual-enlightenment pamphlets, rubber wares, other health-related items" and so on. They also proposed "stricter controls on the promotion of massage salons and language-course institutes." Similar activities were carried out by the *Volkswartbund*, a "Catholic Association to Combat Public Indecency."

The Protestant *Reichsschundkampfstelle* came out in 1925 with "Ten Commandments for Combating Indecency." The third commandment required "opposing all Jewish and indecent journalism." On May 10th, 1933 the *Schundkämpfer* (Enemies of Indecency) took part in the Berlin book burnings according to their own special criteria: "While the gymnast-philologists (*Turnphilogen*) were purging the library of the Magnus-Hirschfeld Institute, the Protestant *Schundkämpfer* cleansed approximately 10 city and 70 private libraries in just one day. Our yield was enormous. Two trailer trucks were required to transport away the 1,212 books--among them, lewd ones of the worst kind--to the festive burning at the Opernplatz. The work of purification has not been completed by the fires which the students kindled. We are determined to continue the purge." Enthused by their work and the new opportunity for political advancement, the devoted activists concluded that after "Dr. Goebbels gave the signal to begin the offensive, Protestant *Schundkämpfer* were mobilized in more than 40 German cities for purging both public and private libraries."

When Julius Fromm began producing his prophylactics in 1914, men in Wilhelmine Germany were still having to ask embarrassedly for them at the barber's or druggist's shop. The origin of the products was usually uncertain, the quality dubious. But the need for them grew rapidly. Because the number of incurable syphilitics was steadily on the rise, doctors issued warnings and used epidemiological arguments to demand that the condom be popularized. As the Reichstag in 1913 began discussions on a law to limit "intercourse with methods for the prevention of birth," the German Society for Obstetrics and Gynecology reacted

with distress. "In our opinion," wrote five prominent Berlin gynecologists, "there can be no question either of a ban or even a restriction on intercourse with condoms since they provide an exceptional health benefit, in addition to their function in preventing conception." Venereal disease would likely increase significantly if obtaining such prophylactics became more difficult. The experts, however, were all in agreement that the "public display" of contraceptives should be banned.

In 1912 the Royal Prussian Ministry of the Interior investigated the causes of the declining birth rate, concluding that "[c]ities and states" were being "virtually flooded with endorsements, pricelists and the like, in which devices such as 'rubbers,' 'prophylactics,' and 'hygienic items,' were being sold. Time and again, these offers referred to "the health and economic disadvantages of an excessive number of children" as well as the necessity of limiting the number of offspring so as to "be able to raise fewer children better." According to report, engaged and young married couples were being sent pamphlets in a well-planned campaign suggesting that modern aids could "make at least the first years of marriage as pleasant as possible." And that was not all. The unmarried, according to this study, had also been receiving advertising presented so as to sound "medical or scientific." In addition, the manufacturers were promoting "the safety of extramarital intercourse." Whoever became accustomed to contraceptives, the ministry officials summarized, would develop "a tendency" to "use them in marriage."

Despite the worries expressed by the Interior Ministry, the condom became popular not only in Germany but also throughout Europe and in the United States in the wake of World War I. Venereal epidemics had already created problems for army leaders in times of peace. Under the circumstances of modern mass warfare, conventional morality became less restrictive and the rate of infection accelerated quickly. In the German infantry, the number of soldiers who died of syphilis or gonorrhea rose by 25 percent; in the occupation forces, deaths rose by 100 percent.



A "battlefield" house of pleasure" for German officers in World War I.

The leaderships of all the armies involved in the war praised abstinence as a soldierly virtue. Yet they also made concessions to reality. In order to keep prostitution under control, they set up bordellos for soldiers. Behind the front lines, existing establishments were quickly taken over and expanded. Near the main line of combat, medical inspectors permitted improvised field bordellos. Condoms were compulsory in many of these dreary establishments. A German military doctor near Warsaw who received orders to establish a "bordello for the members of the traversing formations" reported in his memoirs: "The entry fee for officers was three marks, for soldiers one mark. In exchange each got a prophylactic and a coupon to give to the girl."

The bordellos for simple soldiers and those for officers were normally kept strictly separate. In front of the better houses of pleasure, there were signs such as: "Entry for dogs and regiments (*Mannschaften*) prohibited!" Ordinary soldiers had to display their genitals to a medic (given the legendary name of "Neumann" [i.e., "new man"]) and register before they could get into one of the lines in front of the regimental bordellos. The officers were spared this treatment. As a result, the proportion of venereal diseases in their ranks was appreciably higher. It didn't take long until there was a shortage of condoms. It was no coincidence that 1916 was the year when the Fromm manufacturing company began its ascent into a modern industrial enterprise.



A soldiers' bordello in Galicia

Following the war, many patients told the Berlin sexologist Max Marcuse that the army was where they got the information. In particular, it was rural men who as soldiers were given condoms for the first time. They were supposed to be protecting themselves against venereal diseases but learned in the process how to regulate the

number of children born. The gentlemen in the Interior Ministry responsible for the public health had already made the following prediction in 1916: "Right after the war, the tendency to employ contraceptive devices [will] emerge more strongly among homecoming warriors as well as other persons, so that an increase in the number of births will be averted in the face of mounting economic uncertainty." In the *Little Dictionary of Sexology*, edited by Marcuse in 1923, the condom is listed as "the safest contraceptive device, comparatively speaking" due to "its high level of distribution." It was considered to be "almost entirely risk-free for men and women."

A "Law to Combat Venereal Disease" had been under consideration since 1916 in the Reichstag. After many attempts at compromise, it was scheduled to become effective on October 1, 1923, permitting condoms to be advertised. But conservative forces succeeded at the last minute in delaying the formal announcement of the law in the *Reichsgesetzblatt* until February 18, 1927. They were also successful in further restricting the all-important Paragraph 11, which made all public advertising for condoms illegal. Whoever violated the law could be sentenced to up to six months in prison. The ban did not apply to advertising in professional journals directed at persons "who were involved in permissible commerce with such devices or objects." On the other hand, only those devices "which served to protect against venereal disease" could be "displayed and endorsed." The condom, however, fell under both categories: it was both a contraceptive *and* a prophylactic.

A small ad in a magazine reading "Married couples--hygienic articles, pricelist free!" was thus an object of continuing legal controversy in the Weimar Republic. The "German Central Police Office for the Combat of Indecent Pictures, Literature and Advertising" kept strict watch over whether advertising for condoms was becoming "unsettling," i.e., all too unrestricted. This special office with jurisdiction over the entire country was located in Berlin on Magazinstraße 3-5. It was the same building in which the State Security Service (*Stasi*) of the GDR would later promote hygiene--albeit of a political nature. It is also where the "Brown Book" (*Braunbuch*) on "war criminals and Nazi criminals in West Germany" was compiled.

In light of the legal circumstances, advertising for condoms was permitted only if it referred to protection against venereal disease. The contraceptive function was not to be mentioned at all. Whoever did so, according to the law, would be subject to prosecution and a possible prison sentence for having issued a "public call for indecency." The advertising was kept deliberately vague: "Fromm's Act—Against Infection. Available in All Specialty Stores."

It wasn't until 1932 that Fromm dared to promote the "important advantages" of his products, even though the venue was a professional newsletter for druggists: "1. Our special brand, *Fromm's Act*, the most sold of its kind in Germany, is not simply called transparent, but truly *is* transparent—something which demanding customers appreciate.

2. Our special brand, *Fromm's Act*, is immersed using the same uniform procedure and is guaranteed double-tested—which is why they are so reliable.
3. Our special brand, *Fromm's Act*, doesn't have an unpleasant scent so it doesn't destroy the illusion.
4. Our special brand, *Fromm's Act*, doesn't have an isolating effect. That is, because of its silky-soft sheerness, it doesn't feel like a foreign object.



The Haller Girls in the Berlin Wintergarten, 1926

In addition, the powder applied to aid lubrication was “practically tested.” Nor did it contain any “stinging or irritating substances.” It had only been recently that the company was compelled to take out a large ad stating “Fromm’s Act – Advertising Permitted!” The firm now offered the following reassurance to druggists: “If you are ever unexpectedly policed, we request that you contact us as soon as possible so that we can provide you with counsel and assistance.”

Conditions in the Weimar Republic further relaxed traditionally strict morals. Urbanization, the social mobility of industrial society, the desire for education, and the emancipation of women all sustained the idea of no longer leaving it to nature to determine the number of children. On the other hand, prudence and obscurantism were still to be found. It was no coincidence that packages of Fromm’s Act had for decades contained a folded insert which a customer, without uttering a word, could pass across the counter at a drugstore or pharmacy. On the insert, it stated: “Please discretely dispense me three ‘Fromm’s’ rubbers.”

Fromm worked tirelessly to improve his “empty rubber casings” (the technical term), developing new variants that had little to do with health and more with *joie de vivre*. In 1927, for example, he patented a process for the manufacture of patterned prophylactics. “One can give the surface whatever form one wants, say, stripes or shapes, in one or several different colors.”

Additionally, the resourceful condom manufacturer wrote on the package inserts: "In addition to our normal sizes, we can also upon request produce others which differ from the norm. Be certain to request them at your supplier so that they can place the appropriate order with us." Following it, there was a warning: "For propriety's sake, please do not dispose of our prophylactics and packaging just anywhere, so that they are not found on streets, city squares or walkways. Keep our printed matter away from the eyes of young people, for whom they are not intended."

By the end of the 1920s, Fromm's products were so popular that cabarettists and piano-playing comedians were composing jingles about the rubbers. "The nobleman wears Fromm's with the Fräuleins" or "When it gets you, get Fromm's Act." One even heard, "I'm all Fromm's--ready to burst!" Fromm had done it: his product no longer needed endorsement. Customers saw the name and understood immediately.