

**COUNCIL OF CHRISTIANS AND JEWS  
WESTERN AUSTRALIA INC**

**COMMEMORATION OF  
KRISTALLNACHT**

**“ADDRESS”**

**By**

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of Western Australia**

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**Temple David  
34 Clifton Crescent  
MOUNT LAWLEY WA**

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I was greatly honoured to receive the invitation from the Hon Secretary of the Council to be the guest speaker at the 2006 Service to commemorate the Kristallnacht here at the Temple David. As some of you may know, I was born at Bunbury. Our family doctor was Doctor Neville Joel, whose family were very close friends of my family. Doctor Joel was the doctor who assisted in my birth and attended to my circumcision.

While I am a Christian, and, in particular, an Anglican educated at Guildford Grammar school, the school accommodated a number of Jewish boys. These included Barry Silbert who was a good friend. After leaving school, we both played rugby. Barry was a top class player and became a top class business man. At Guildford he distinguished himself as a scholar as well as an athlete. Among other things, he distinguished himself by being awarded the Headmaster's Divinity Prize. We both later played Rugby for the State. Barry was later to remark that "while I was not so strong on the New Testament I killed them in my work on the Old Testament".

More than ten years ago I was privileged in May 1996 to be asked to speak at the WA Law Week Service conducted by the Perth Hebrew Congregation at the Perth Synagogue at the invitation of Rabbi David Freilich on the topic of *Religion, Tolerance and the Law*.

Tonight, we mark Kristallnacht (The Night of Broken Glass). This commemorates the pogrom against Jews throughout Germany and parts of Austria on November 9-10, 1938. This was the year in which I was born. On that terrible night, and in the days leading up to it, Jewish homes and stores were ransacked in 1000 German cities, towns and villages, as ordinary citizens and Stormtroops destroyed buildings with sledgehammers, leaving the streets covered in smashed windows. This was the origin of the name "Night of Broken Glass" or Kristallnacht. Also, on that night and in the days leading up to it, many Jews were beaten to death; 30,000 Jewish men were taken into concentration camps; and 1,668 Synagogues were ransacked or set on fire.

*The Times* newspaper in London commented that:

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“No foreign propagandist bent upon blackening Germany before the world could outdo the tale of burnings and beatings, of blackguardly assaults on defenceless and innocent people, which disgraced that country yesterday.”

There has been some controversy about the name for this event, although it was commonly called *die Kristallnacht* because so many shop windows, of shops mostly owned by Jewish shopkeepers, were broken during the night. Today, in official German sources, the events are referred to as “Pogromnacht (“pogrom night”), reflecting the fear that “Kristallnacht” was too euphemistic, given the fact that the original dimension of the term had been lost. Many other Germans refuse to call it *Pogromnacht*, arguing that the perversity, obscenity and uniqueness of the *Reichskristallnacht* was only described in the proper name *Kristallnacht*, and that *Pogromnacht* was itself a euphemism.

History shows that by the end of the 1920s, most German Jews were loyal to their country, assimilated and relatively prosperous. They had served in the Germany army and contributed to every field of German science, business and culture. After the Nazis were elected to power in 1933, as a result of progressively harsher state-sponsored anti-Semitic persecution, by 1938 the Jews had been almost completely excluded from German social and political life. Many sought asylum abroad, and thousands did manage to leave, but as Chaim Weizmann wrote in 1936 “The world seemed to be divided into two parts – those places where the Jews could not live and those where they could not enter”.

The historian, Eric Johnson, noted that in the year preceding Kristallnacht, the Germans “had entered a new radical phase in anti-Semitic activity”. Although there is still some controversy about it, some historians believe that the Nazi government had been contemplating a planned attack of violence against the Jews for a significant period. They were simply waiting for an appropriate pretext, as there has been shown to be evidence of planning such an event stretching back as early as 1937. The Zionist leadership in Palestine wrote in February 1938 that:

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“... a very reliable private source – one which can be traced back to the highest echelons of the SS leadership, that there was an intention to carry out a genuine and dramatic pogrom in Germany on a large scale in the near future.”

On October 28, 1938 17,000 Polish Jews living in Germany (some for more than a decade) were arrested and taken to the river marking the Polish-German border and forced to cross it. The Polish border guards sent them back over the river into Germany and this stalemate continued for days in pouring rain, the Jews marching without food or shelter between the borders until the Polish government admitted them to a concentration camp. The conditions of these camps “were so bad that some actually tried to escape back into Germany and were shot”, according to the evidence of a British woman who was sent to help those who had been expelled from Germany.

Herschell Grynszpan, a German Jew living in Paris, received a letter from his family describing the horrible conditions they experienced in the deportation. Seeking to alleviate their situation, he appealed repeatedly over the next few days to Ernst vom Rath, Third Secretary of the German Embassy in Paris, who could not help him. On Monday, November 7, Grynszpan shot vom Rath in the stomach. He attempted and missed three additional shots. Two days later, on November 9, the Secretary died.

Vom Rath’s assassination served as an excuse for launching a rampage against Jewish inhabitants throughout Germany. The word of von Rath’s death reached Hitler during a dinner with a number of key members of the Nazi party. After an intensive heated conversation, Hitler left the dinner without giving his usual address. Goebbels made the speech instead. He said that:

“The Führer has decided that such demonstrations should not be prepared or organised by the party, but insofar as they erupt spontaneously, they are not to be hampered.”

While on the surface this was relatively innocuous comment, the chief party judge, Walter Buch, later said that the message was clear, namely, that they amounted to a

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command by Goebbels to the party leaders to organise the pogrom that became Kristallnacht.

Some leading party officials disagreed with Goebbels' actions, fearing the diplomatic crisis it would entail. Heinrich Himmler even went so far as to write:

“I suppose that it is Goebbels' megalomania ... and stupidity which are responsible for starting this operation now, in a particularly difficult diplomatic situation.”

A number of historians including Friedlander, believed that Goebbels had personal reasons for wanting to bring about Kristallnacht. Goebbels had recently suffered some personal humiliation in the ineffectiveness of his propaganda campaign during the Sudetenland crisis and was also in disgrace over an affair he had with a Czech actress. Goebbels needed to prove himself again in the eyes of Hitler, and Kristallnacht provided the opportunity.

At 1:20am on November 10, 1938, Reinhard Heydrich sent an urgent secret telegram to “All Headquarters and Stations of the State Police, All Districts and Sub-districts of the SA” containing instructions regarding the riots. The timing of the riots varied from unit to unit. The Gauleiters started at about 10:30pm, only two hours after news of vom Rath's death reached Germany. They were followed by the SA at 11pm and the SS at around 1:20am. Most were wearing civilian clothes and were armed with sledgehammers and axes, and soon went to work on the destruction of Jewish property. The orders given were very specific, namely, no measures endangering German life or property were to be taken. Synagogues too close to German property were smashed rather than burned. Jewish businesses or dwellings could be destroyed but not looted. Foreigners (even Jewish foreigners) were not to be the subjects of violence, and synagogue archives were to be transferred to the SD. The men were also ordered to arrest as many Jews as the local jails would hold, preferable targets being young healthy males, and if possible, rich.

Jewish homes and stores were ransacked all throughout Germany and also in Vienna, with a mixture of German citizens and Stormtroops destroying buildings with sledgehammers, leaving the streets covered in smashed windows of destroyed businesses, the next morning, leading to the origin of the name “Crystal Night”. Although violence against Jews had not been condoned by the authorities, there were cases of Jews being beaten or assaulted.

The pogrom damaged, and in many cases, destroyed 1570 or more synagogues, constituting nearly all of those in Germany. Many Jewish cemeteries, more than 7,000 Jewish shops and 29 department stores were demolished. Some Jews were beaten to death while others were forced to watch. More than 30,000 Jewish males were arrested and taken to concentration camps, including Dachau, Buchenwald, and Sachsenhausen. The treatment of prisoners in the camps was brutal, but most were released during the following three months on condition that they leave Germany.

The number of German Jews killed is uncertain, with estimates ranging from 36 to about 200 over two days of rioting. The number killed in the rioting is most often cited as 91. There are believed to have been hundreds of suicides in addition to this, as the slim slivers of hope that remained in some Jews disappeared completely. Counting deaths at the concentration camps, around 2,000 – 2,500 deaths were directly or indirectly attributed to the Kristallnacht pogrom. A few non-Jewish Germans mistaken for Jews were also killed.

The synagogues, some centuries old, were also victims of sadistic violence. The tactics of the Stormtroops practiced on these and other sacred sites were described as “approaching the ghoulish” by the Consul for the United States in Leipzig. Even graveyards were not spared, as tombstones were uprooted and graves violated. Fires were lit, and prayer books, scrolls, artwork and works of philosophy were thrown upon them. Precious buildings were either burned or smashed until unrecognizable. One witness recalled the destruction of the synagogue that a tiny Jewish community had built in small village only twelve years earlier as follows:

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“It did not take long before the first heavy grey stones came tumbling down, and the children of the village amused themselves as they flung stones into the many coloured windows. When the first rays of a cold and pale November sun penetrated the heavy dark clouds, the little synagogue was but a heap of stone, broken glass and smashed-up woodwork.”

Events in Austria were no less horrendous. Most of Vienna’s 94 synagogues and prayer-houses were partially or totally destroyed. People were subjected to all manner of humiliations, including being forced to scrub the pavements whilst being tormented by their fellow Austrians, some of whom had been their friends and neighbours.

The violence was officially called to a stop by Goebbels on 11 November, but violence continued against the Jews in the concentration camps, despite orders requesting “special treatment” to ensure that this did not happen.

On 23 November 1938 the *News Chronicle* newspaper in London published an article on an incident at one concentration camp at Sachsenhausen. Sixty-two Jews suffered punishment so severe that the police “unable to bear their cries, turned their backs”. They were beaten until they fell, and when they fell, they were further beaten. For half an hour they were submitted to this “orgy” of violence. At the end of it, “twelve of the sixty-two were dead, their skulls smashed. The others were all unconscious. The eyes of some had been knocked out, their faces flattened and shapeless.” The 30,000 Jewish males that had been imprisoned during Kristallnacht were released over the next three months, but by then over 2,000 had died.

The top Nazi official, Hermann Göring met with other members of the Nazi leadership on November 12 to plan the next steps after the riot, setting the stage for formal government action that would eventually lead to the Holocaust. According to the transcript of the meeting, Göring said:

“I have received a letter written on the Führer’s orders requesting that the Jewish question be now, once and for all, coordinated and solved one way or another ... I should not want to leave any doubt, gentlemen, as to the aim of

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today's meeting. We have not come together merely to talk again, but to make decisions, and I implore competent agencies to take all measures for the elimination of the Jew from the German economy, and to submit them to me."

The persecution and economic damage done to German Jews did not stop with the pogrom, even as their places of business were ransacked. They were also forced to pay a collective fine of 1 Billion Marks for the murder of vom Rath, a sum which is roughly equal to \$US 5.5 Billion in today's currency, and which was levied by the compulsory acquisition of 20% of all Jewish property by the State. Six million marks of insurance payments for property damage due to the Jewish community were to be paid to the government instead as "damages to the German Nation."

The number of emigrating Jews spiked as those who could, left the country. This was the outcome desired by the Nazi party. In the ten months following Kristallnacht, more than 115,000 Jews emigrated from Germany. The majority went to other European countries, the US and Palestine, and at least 14,000 made it to Shanghai.

A less desirable outcome was the international reaction, as several important nations condemned the acts. Perhaps the most important result was that, despite these reactions, the Nazi party never faced significant repercussions, and so came to believe that the world would tolerate persecution on this scale.

Kristallnacht sparked international outrage. Kristallnacht also marked a turning point in relations between Nazi Germany and the rest of the world. The brutality of the pogrom and the Nazi Government's deliberate policy of encouraging the violence once it began, laid bear the repressive nature and widespread anti-Semitism then entrenched in Germany and turned world opinion sharply against the Nazi regime, with some politicians even calling for a war against it. This and the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1939 further hastened the onset of World War II and the Holocaust.

Kristallnacht changed the nature of persecution from economic, political and social to the physical forms such as beatings, murder and incarceration, and as such is often

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referred to as the beginning of the Holocaust. In the words of historian Max Rein in 1998:

“Kristallnacht came ... and everything was changed.”

Many decades later, association with the Kristallnacht anniversary was cited as the main reason against choosing 9 November, the day the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, as the new German national holiday. In fact, a different day was chosen to celebrate German reunification, namely, 3 October, 1990.

In 1962, I made an extensive tour of Europe including Berlin and other German cities and visited the Concentration Camps at Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen.

I have nothing but great admiration for the survivors of the Holocaust for their bravery and determination as well as their great generosity of spirit which has been an inspiration to my generation of Australians. I accept completely the view that freedom of religion is one of the fundamental freedoms which entitles Australians to call our society a free society and that statutes are not intended to affect this freedom.

I think it can be argued that the law, after uncertain beginnings, now provides a reasonable basis for the achievement of religious tolerance. It has been recognised that “religion” involves a “characteristic unity” between practices and observances and a belief in the supernatural, and that this “unity” represents the pre-eminent manifestation of individual conscience, and is therefore deserving of legal protection. “Religious freedom” is regarded as an inherent right of the individual which includes, not only the “right to believe”, but also, subject to the general law, the “right to act”. “Religious beliefs” are not dismissed out of hand because their tenets are difficult to understand, or are considered to lack validity or utility, and the “religious beliefs” of the prevailing majority are no longer promoted at the expense of those of the minority.

However, though the law can educate and enforce, true religious tolerance resides in the hearts and minds of individuals. Therefore, in affirming our own faith then, let us take the time and the trouble to realise the value of our neighbour’s faith. Let me

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conclude then by referring to the following lesson which Rabbi Dr Jonathon Sacks tells of having received many years ago from a Jewish mystic:

“Imagine, [said the mystic], two people who spend their lives transporting stones. One carries bags of diamonds. The other hauls sacks of rocks. Each is now asked to take a consignment of rubies. Which of the two understands what he is now to carry? The man who is used to diamonds knows that stones can be precious, even those that are not diamonds. But the man who has carried only rocks thinks of stones as a mere burden. They have weight but not worth. Rubies are beyond his comprehension. So it is, [said the mystic], with faith. If we cherish our own, then we know the value of others. We may regard ours as a diamond and another faith as a ruby, but we know that both are precious stones. ... True tolerance, he implied, comes not from the absence of faith but from its living presence.”