

Occasional address for the Council of Christians and Jews

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On 9 November 2017

“Commemoration of Kristallnacht”

Kristallnacht, literally translated as "Night of Crystal," is often referred to as the "Night of Broken Glass." The name refers to the wave of violent anti-Jewish protests, or pogroms, which took place on November 9 and 10, 1938, exactly 79 years ago tonight.

This wave of violence took place throughout Germany, Austria, which had been annexed by the Nazis, and in areas of the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia, which had been recently occupied by German troops.

Kristallnacht owes its name to the shards of shattered glass that lined German streets in the wake of the pogrom—broken glass from the windows of synagogues, homes, and Jewish-owned businesses plundered and destroyed during the violence.

The violence was instigated primarily by Nazi Party officials and members of the SA, commonly known as Storm Troopers, and Hitler Youth.

In its aftermath, Nazi officials announced that Kristallnacht had erupted as a spontaneous outburst of public sentiment in response to the assassination of Ernst vom Rath, a German embassy official stationed in Paris. Herschel Grynszpan, a 17-year-old Polish Jew, had shot the diplomat on November 7, 1938 in protest at the expulsion by German authorities a few days earlier, of thousands of Jews of Polish citizenship living in Germany. Grynszpan had received news that his parents, residents in Germany since 1911, were among them.

Vom Rath died on November 9, 1938, two days after the shooting. The day happened to coincide with the anniversary of an important date in the National Socialist calendar. The Nazi Party leadership, assembled in Munich for the commemoration, chose to use the occasion as a pretext to launch a night of anti-Semitic excesses. Propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels suggested to the assembled Nazis that 'World Jewry' had conspired to commit the assassination and he announced that:

"the Führer has decided that ... demonstrations should not be prepared or organized by the Party, but insofar as they erupt spontaneously, they are not to be hampered."

After his speech, the assembled regional Party leaders issued instructions to their local offices. Violence began to erupt in various parts of the Reich throughout the late evening and early morning hours of November 9–10.

At 1:20 a.m. on November 10, Reinhard Heydrich, in his capacity as head of the Security Police sent an urgent telegram to the State Police and to SA leaders in their various districts, with directives regarding the riots.

SA and Hitler Youth units throughout Germany and its annexed territories set about the destruction of Jewish-owned homes and businesses. Members of many units wore civilian clothes to support the fiction that the disturbances were expressions of 'outraged public reaction.'

Despite the outward appearance of spontaneous violence, the orders Heydrich gave were specific:

- the "spontaneous" rioters were to take no measures endangering non-Jewish German life or property;
- they were not to subject foreigners (even Jewish foreigners) to violence;
- they were to remove all synagogue archives prior to vandalizing synagogues and other properties of the Jewish communities, and to transfer that archival material to the Security Service
- police officials should arrest as many Jews as local jails could hold, preferably young, healthy men.

The rioters destroyed 267 synagogues throughout Germany, Austria, and the Sudetenland. Many synagogues burned throughout the night in full view of the public and of local firefighters, who had received orders to intervene only to prevent flames from spreading to nearby buildings.

SA and Hitler Youth members across the country shattered the shop windows of an estimated 7,500 Jewish-owned commercial establishments and looted their wares. Jewish cemeteries became a particular object of desecration in many regions.

The pogrom proved especially destructive in Berlin and Vienna, home to the two largest Jewish communities.

Mobs roamed the streets, attacking Jews in their houses and forcing Jews they encountered to perform acts of public humiliation. Although murder did not figure in the central directives, Kristallnacht claimed the lives of at least 91 Jews between 9 and 10 November. Records of the period also document a high number of rapes and of suicides in the aftermath of the violence.

As the pogrom spread, units of the SS and Gestapo (Secret State Police), following Heydrich's instructions, arrested up to 30,000 Jewish males, and transferred most of them from local prisons to Dachau, Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen, and other concentration camps.

Significantly, Kristallnacht marks the first instance in which the Nazi regime incarcerated Jews on a massive scale simply on the basis of their ethnicity. Hundreds died in the camps as a result of the brutal treatment they endured. Most did obtain release over the next three months on the condition that they begin the process of emigration from Germany. Indeed, the effects of Kristallnacht would serve as a spur to the emigration of Jews from Germany in the months to come.

In the immediate aftermath of the pogrom, many German leaders, like Hermann Göring, criticized the extensive material losses produced by the riots, pointing out that if nothing were done to intervene, German insurance companies—not Jewish-owned businesses—would have to carry the costs of the damages.

The German government made an immediate pronouncement that "the Jews" themselves were to blame for the pogrom and imposed a fine of one billion Reichsmark (about 400 million US dollars at 1938 rates) on the German Jewish community. The Reich government confiscated all insurance payouts to Jews whose businesses and homes were looted or destroyed, leaving the Jewish owners personally responsible for the cost of all repairs.

In the weeks that followed, the German government promulgated dozens of laws and decrees designed to deprive Jews of their property and of their means of livelihood. Many of these laws enforced “Aryanization” policy—the transfer of Jewish-owned enterprises and property to “Aryan” ownership, usually for a fraction of their true value.

Other laws prevented Jews, already ineligible for employment in the public sector, from practicing most professions in the private sector. Jewish children still attending German schools were expelled, German Jews lost their right to hold a driver's license or own a car.

Laws restricted access to public transport, Jews were prohibited from attending “German” theatres, movie cinemas, or concert halls.

Kristallnacht was one of the most important turning points in National Socialist anti-Semitic policy. Historians have noted that after the pogrom, anti-Jewish policy was concentrated more and more into the hands of the SS and the indifference or passivity with which most German civilians responded to the violence, signalled to the Nazi regime that the German public was prepared for more radical measures.

This emboldened the Nazi regime to expand measures aimed at removing Jews entirely from German economic and social life. To achieve the Nazis’ aim of a Germany “free of Jews” - Judenrein - led to policies of forced emigration, then deportation of the Jewish population “to the East”, and ultimately the attempted annihilation of European Jewry by implementing “The Final Solution”.

Most of what I have described is probably well known to many of you and is the reason why we are here tonight. But the consequences of Kristallnacht were felt not just in Germany and Austria, but across the whole of Nazi occupied Europe and beyond.

Kristallnacht was the spark, that lit the flame, that became the Holocaust.

Everywhere the Nazis went they pursued with great zeal and vigour the cleansing of Jews from the landscape. Poland was invaded by the Nazis in September 1939 and was then home to about 3.3 million Jews, almost 10% of the entire Polish population.

By 1945, 90% of the Jews of Poland, or around 3 million in number, had been murdered.

One of the few Polish Jews to survive was my father, Chaim Majteles.

Chaim, or Harry as he was generally known, for many years spoke about his experiences during the Holocaust to hundreds of school age children, who visited the Holocaust Museum and exhibition at the Holocaust Institute of WA, in Yokine.

He didn’t really enjoy reliving the horrors that he had seen and endured, but his motivation for doing so was to try and educate the next generation of children about the evils of racism, anti-Semitism and discrimination, in the hope that he might somehow make a difference.

Sadly, my father passed away in 2004, a month shy of his 80th birthday. Sometime later, I was asked by the then President of the Institute if I would be prepared to tell my father’s story to the visiting students.

I hesitated at first, because I thought that hearing it from someone who did not directly experience what my father had been through, would be a poor substitute for the real thing.

But I came to the realisation that with survivor numbers dwindling, it was better that his story be told, albeit second hand, rather not be told at all.

So, some years ago I started to tell my father's story to the students who came to the Institute to learn about the Holocaust. But I decided that if I was going to tell my father's story, it needed to be in the first person. I wanted the students to imagine that it was my father speaking to them, and that is what I ask them to do.

So tonight, as I share with you some of Chaim's story of survival, I ask that you too imagine that it is his voice you are hearing, recounting events that took place so many years ago.

Chaim's Story

I am a survivor of the Holocaust and I am here to tell you a little of my story.

For me, talking about the Holocaust is like re-living it every time. It was a time in my life that I would rather forget, but I am unable to do so. I often wake in the middle of the night to images of cruelty and death and I guess I will always live with the nightmares.

Even though I was there and lived through it all, I can still hardly believe how this could have happened and how I survived at all.

My story starts in a small town called Zombkowitz, in the south west of Poland in an area called Silesia, where I was born in 1925. I was the middle child of 5 children, 2 older brothers Tovie and Avraham, a younger brother Shmuel and sister, Faygele.

I went to the local school and was the only Jewish boy in a class of 60 Polish kids. I was a good student and dreamed of being a doctor one day. I lived in a happy home with my 4 siblings.

But not long after Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933, all that was about to end. The mood in Europe changed over the ensuing years as anti-Jewish feeling amongst the local Polish population intensified, fuelled by the anti-Semitic rantings of Hitler, which were widely broadcast.

By the time my parents made the decision to try and leave Poland, it was too late. When attempts were finally made to get passports and visas, they found that there were now millions of Jews doing the same thing.

Suddenly almost every Jew wanted to sell up and leave, but the often heard saying amongst the locals was "why buy when we will get it all for nothing".

I was 14 when the Nazis invaded Poland in September 1939. From that moment on, everything changed. The Nazis issued decrees about almost everything that impacted the local population and especially the Jews.

Food, petrol, cigarettes and liquor were rationed and the Polish currency was replaced by the German Mark. Our family's savings had become worthless overnight.

All Polish citizens were issued identity cards and ration cards. As Jews, we had a different colour identity card and a large J was stamped on our ration cards. This meant we were given smaller amounts of food rations and were subjected to a number of other restrictions. We were also required to wear white armbands with a blue Star of David. And the penalties for noncompliance were severe.

Not long after the Nazis occupied Poland, they started to round up mainly younger and able bodied Jewish men in our district for the reasons, we were told, of being deported to Germany as forced labour. My parents were very fortunate to be able to avoid deportation for many months, but around May 1940 things changed for the worse.

I remember the day well as it was around the time of my 15th birthday. A large black car stopped in front of my parent's shoe shop in the town. Several men entered the shop and one of them, dressed in a full length black leather coat, identified himself a Gestapo agent of the Secret Police Special Branch for Jewish Affairs. He asked to speak to my father.

He then produced a document from which he read. The shop, the factory which made the shoes that we sold in the shop, our house and all the contents were to be confiscated, or as he put it, were to be given by my father "of his own free will".

My father not surprisingly, hesitated. He could not believe this was happening. The Gestapo agent looked at my father and with a smirk on his face that is burned in my memory, he took his pistol from the holster, pointed it at my father's head and said – "either you sign or you will die".

My mother was by now distraught and she urged my father to sign, which he duly did.

The Gestapo officer then looked at his watch and screamed at my father: "you have 5 minutes to get off these premises!"

A short time later we were standing in the street, clutching what few possessions we could grab and carry in the few minutes afforded us.

We were now refugees in our own town.

A few days later my eldest brother Tovie and my mother's brother, my uncle Shimon, were deported for slave labour, with a host of other Jews from our town.

I knew then, if I didn't already, that things would never be the same again.

We eventually found ourselves living in a ghetto in a nearby larger town. Food and medicine was scarce, and living conditions in the Ghetto were deplorable.

My brother Avraham and I worked in a Nazi controlled shoe factory nearby, repairing military boots that had been collected from dead or wounded soldiers. We were lucky because we were regarded as being "useful". Sadly, many others were not so fortunate and found themselves rounded up and deported.

The round-ups happened regularly and without warning. There was talk about where they were being taken and what was happening to them, but some of the stories were so horrible that we didn't want to believe them.

I remember a day in September 1942. All the Jews, numbering several thousand, were ordered out of the Ghetto buildings and to assemble in the ghetto square where selection points had been set up by the Gestapo.

SS troops in full battle gear surrounded the square. As people approached each selection point, some were being "selected" for deportation and were forced towards cattle wagons that had been assembled at the nearby railway siding, whilst others were directed to remain behind.

In the swirling mass of people my brother and I were separated from my parents and my little sister and when we reached the selection point, he and I were directed to remain but we were able to see that my parents and sister had been forced behind a barbed wire enclosure, ready for loading onto the cattle wagons.

By a combination of good fortune and a sympathetic guard, we managed to reach my father and have him released from the enclosure, but we could not save my mother or my sister.

I cannot adequately describe my feelings as we watched the wagons being loaded, the doors rolled shut and locked, the train departing and disappearing into the distance.

I wept uncontrollably. But I had to accept that life must go on and that nothing I could do would bring my mother and sister back.

By early 1943 the conditions in the ghetto had worsened and the complete liquidation of the ghetto commenced around March 1943. Only those with necessary skills were being resettled in Srodula, a suburb of the larger nearby city, Sosnowitz.

My father, my brother and I were able to avoid deportation by being again classed as "useful" to the Nazi war machine.

The Srodula ghetto was like a prison – barbed wire fences and SS guards in watchtowers. The 3 of us lived in a crowded apartment with 2 other families and we were continually being watched.

Incredibly, some people managed to escape from the ghetto, but inevitably freedom was short lived. There were plenty of hostile Poles happy to hunt down escapees in return for a kilo of sugar or a bottle of vodka.

That was about the value of a Jewish life at that time.

Our life in this ghetto only lasted a few months however, because not long after, the Srodula ghetto was also liquidated.

I was hiding in a bunker with my father during one of the round-ups, but my brother was caught and the last we knew of his fate is that he was deported on a cattle wagon transport.

Only a few days later we were ourselves discovered in our bunker and we were marched to the rail yards, with the hundreds of others that had been rounded up.

It was at the rail yards that I witnessed scenes of unrepeatable brutality by the SS guards. They were forcing everyone into the enclosed wagons, squeezed in so tightly that there was barely room to sit on the floor and with only a small opening at the top of each wagon wall to allow air in.

I was sure that this was the end and that to wherever we were being taken, we would die. I spoke to my father and I told him that I didn't want to die like that and that I wanted to try and escape.

We said our goodbyes and his parting words to me, in Yiddish, were:

"may you live to tell the world what we have been going through".

With that, he lifted me up on his shoulders and I stretched to reach the opening. I was small enough to squeeze through the opening, but I waited until we were passing through a forest area.

I was then pushed through the opening and I jumped from the train, falling onto the soft embankment.

The guards on the train saw me and opened fire, but although I was hit, luckily it was only in my left wrist.

I stayed down, the train did not stop and after I was sure it was gone, I wrapped my wrist in my handkerchief and ran into the forest.

I didn't know the area I was in and I was afraid of being captured again, but after a few days of hiding in the forest I thought it best to return to the ghetto where there might still be some Jews left.

When I reached the ghetto, I found there was very little security, as the ghetto had been all but emptied. I saw a group of Jewish men on a work detail removing household goods and furniture from the now empty buildings and I joined them.

One of the men in that group was called Hermann and he and I became friends. He was an amazing man who taught me so much of what I was going to have to do, if I was to survive.

It was Hermann who after a short time, arranged for us to be hidden in a Polish village farm, as he knew that once the buildings were cleared the guards would kill us or we would also be deported. We escaped from the ghetto without problem and although the farmer was being bribed to hide us in his barn, after a short time he changed his mind and wanted us gone.

If he forced us out we would have no place to go. The only option we had was to find a way to get over the border and escape to Romania, as we had heard that the Jews there had not been deported.

To do that however needed us to find a smuggler who could get us across the borders and that in turn needed someone to be able to move about.

We were able to get in touch with a printer in the local town who was Jewish, but who was forced to work for the Nazis. He provided me with false identity papers – I was now an ethnic German, Siegfried Knoll, and as I was fair haired and spoke fluent German, I was able to go out to try and contact the smuggler, to make arrangements for our planned escape.

It was now early May 1943. I had travelled by train to the Polish border town of Zwardon, where I was due to meet the smuggler. At the station, military police were checking all male passengers, looking for army deserters.

Here I was, holding papers as an ethnic German, 18 years old and not in uniform. Not surprisingly, after they inspected my papers, they suspected me to be a deserter. I was arrested and handed over to the Gestapo, who interrogated me, after first giving me a savage beating.

Army deserters were summarily executed, so the only way I could avoid being shot as a deserter, was to convince my Gestapo interrogator that I was not an army deserter, but simply a Jew with false papers.

My reward for convincing him that I was indeed a Jew, was that a Gestapo agent personally drove me to the Auschwitz Konzentration Lager, about 80 kilometres from Zwardon, where I arrived on the 11th of May 1943, just 2 days after my 19th birthday.

Once there, I was tattooed with the number 187818 on the inside of my left forearm. I was given a shirt, a pair of flimsy striped trousers, a jacket and a cap. Meals consisted of a brownish liquid for breakfast and watery soup in the evenings.

I was always hungry at Auschwitz, but this did not compare with the constant fear of the regular "selections", either for medical experiments or for executions or the gas chambers at the nearby Birkenau camp.

My initial job at Auschwitz was unloading coal from the rail wagons, but I was lucky to be later transferred to a much easier and cleaner job in the SS General Store, which was housed in a building about half way between the Auschwitz and Birkenau camps.

Our job was to open the suitcases and sort the contents into separate piles. We all knew what had happened to their owners – they had gone straight to the gas chambers and crematoria at Birkenau, the extermination camp.

What I saw there both horrified and amazed me. The sheer number of personal belongings brought in by trucks from the Birkenau railway ramps was beyond imagination.

I also well remember the cans of Zyklon B crystals that were being safely stored and were regularly sent to Birkenau when needed and which were constantly replenished with new shipments.

By late 1944 the war was going badly for the Nazis and in January 1945 the Russian army was approaching Auschwitz, closing in from the East.

The Nazis began evacuating the camps, but before they did so, they dynamited the installations to try and hide the horrors that had had gone on there.

Guarded by heavily armed SS troops, we were forced to march west in a long column over snow covered roads in sub-zero temperatures and without food or water. I suffered tremendously from frostbite, but I was one of the lucky ones, as many simply died on the march or were shot by the SS if they stopped to even pick up some snow to try and get a drink.

After marching for several days and nights we arrived at a small town in Poland, then called Loslau, where we joined hundreds of prisoners of many nationalities that had all been marched from other camps to there. We were loaded into open wagons of a coal train and after travelling for several more days and nights, we arrived at Mauthausen Concentration camp, near Linz in Austria, on the 26th of January 1945.

It was the dead of winter and when we arrived, we could see that many poor souls had simply frozen to death during the journey in the open carriages.

At Mauthausen I lied about my occupation. I told the guards that I was a mechanic. This resulted in my being transferred to another camp called Ebensee, which housed an underground armament factory, and after that to a third camp called Gusen, also in Austria, where I also worked in an armament factory.

By April 1945 conditions at Gusen were so bad that the guards had even stopped giving us food. Lice and disease outbreaks were common and had overwhelmed the camp.

I had become very sick, I was very weak and could hardly walk.

I had not eaten anything for several days, except for some grass.

It was at 5am roll call on the 5th of May 1945, that I remember looking up at the watchtowers, as we did every day, and I noticed that there were no SS guards anywhere to be seen.

It was unbelievable! We were alone in the camp and bewildered.

It was not until the afternoon of that day that we realised what was happening. That was when I saw the first American tank roll past the gates of the camp.

I cannot describe the joy that moment held for me, when I saw the big white star painted on the side of that tank.

The gates were opened and mustering what little strength I had left, I walked to freedom, just as the tanks of the American 11th Armoured division rolled into the camp.

It took me many months to recover physically. I was emaciated and I had a bad infection from the bullet wound in my wrist, but recover I did.

But it took me much longer to recover psychologically. I enjoyed, if that is the word, my 20th birthday in freedom, but at what cost.

After returning to Poland some time later in search of any of my family that might also have survived, I came to understand that I was the only member of my immediate family of seven, to have survived.

It gives me no great pleasure to recall these painful memories, but at a time when many in the world find it fashionable to say it never happened, it is important to speak out and let the truth be heard.

When I recall the hundreds of days I spent behind electrified fences or living in hiding, being constantly hungry, being humiliated, being beaten, or just being in fear of my life, I also remember the will that I had to never give up, to continue to struggle, to stay alive, so I could one day fulfil my father's wish:

"may you live to tell the world what we have been going through"

Epilogue

When my sister Faye and I were growing up in the 60's and 70's, neither my father or my mother, who is also an Auschwitz survivor, rarely if ever spoke to us about their experiences during the Holocaust.

But in 1985 they went to Israel as guests of the City of Jerusalem, who had invited survivors from the world over to come to Jerusalem to mark the 40th anniversary of their liberation. As part of that trip they also returned to visit places in Poland, Austria, Germany and Rumania where they had either lived or suffered so many years ago.

It was after their return from that emotional trip that I remember they felt more able to talk about their experiences. Some years later, Chaim began speaking to students at the Holocaust Institute and he was also encouraged to write his autobiography, which he called "Where there's life there's hope".

This unburdening of his spirit culminated in his taking me, my sister and his grandson, Simon, on a journey to Poland and Austria to see where he had been during that time.

I will conclude by sharing with you one moment from that trip, which holds a special place in my memory.

After visiting Zombkowitz, where Chaim was born and lived as a child, we drove the short distance to see the twin camps of Auschwitz and Birkenau. At Auschwitz, we purchased our entrance tickets and the lady behind the counter enquired as to whether we would like a guide. We debated for a moment or two whether we needed a guide, after all, Chaim had been here and knew his way around.

In the end, we decided to engage the services of a guide and we were introduced to a young Polish woman, a teacher in the local town, Oswiecim. She was supplementing her income by doing some guiding for the tourists.

We set off through the infamous entrance gates, "Arbeit Macht Frei", and called in to the first building, the records section. We didn't really need any validation of the fact that Chaim had been a prisoner here, but there it was, in perfect copperplate handwriting, protected under plastic, the written record of his arrival at Auschwitz, his tattoo number 187818 and all his personal information.

Perfectly preserved, along with many thousands of other similar records, most of whom sadly did not survive as well as their records did.

We then moved on and as we were walking towards the next building, the guide started telling us something about an area to the left of the path we were walking along. I don't recall now exactly what she said, but what I do recall is that my father, somewhat gently, responded by saying "I don't think that's right".

She must not have fully heard what he said, because she turned to my father and asked him what he had said and he repeated again, "I don't think that's right", to which she replied, without any malice, "How would you know?" "Well", he said, almost apologetically, "I was here in that time".

There was a momentary silence as she took in what Chaim had said, and she then put her hand to her chest, drew in an enormous breath and said: "Oh my god, I have never before had an inmate in one of my tours!!".

Well, the next hour or so was a case of the guide being the guided. At each stop along the way, after explaining what it was we were looking at, she would turn to Chaim and seek his confirmation or comment.

It was a very emotional experience, as my sister and I and Simon walked arm in arm, a few steps behind Chaim and the guide, listening and watching and taking it all in, through tears of joy and of sadness, or a combination of both.

Ladies and gentlemen, to conclude - Chaim's story that you have heard tonight did not happen on Kristallnacht.

But the conflagration that was the Holocaust that inevitably followed from the spark of Kristallnacht, must also be remembered and commemorated, never to be forgotten.