

INFERNO — THE NIGHT OF BROKEN GLASS
Commemoration of Kristallnacht
12TH November 2023

I did not personally experience Kristallnacht, but I am the wife of one who did as a 9-year-old child in Breslau Germany.

My beloved late husband Ken Arkwright was a Holocaust survivor who lived through these horrific times and I am so honoured to be a speaker at today's Kristallnacht Commemoration.

On the night of 9 November 1938, an anti-Jewish pogrom broke out all over Germany. It came to be known by the somewhat misleading and euphemistic name of Kristallnacht. The pogrom symbolized and stepped up the pace of the Nazi anti-Jewish policies of 1938.

An incident several days earlier had given the Nazi authorities an excuse to instigate the pogrom.

On November 7th a 17-year-old Polish Jewish student named Hershel Grynszpan had shot Ernst vom Rath, the 3rd Secretary of the German Embassy in Paris.

Grynszpan, enraged by the deportation of his parents to Poland from Hanover, Germany, where they had lived since 1914, hoped that his dramatic action would alert the world to the ominous plight of Europe's Jews.

When the French police arrested Grynszpan, he sobbed: "Being a Jew is not a crime. I am not a dog. I have a right to live and the Jewish people have a right to exist on earth. Wherever I have been I have been chased like an animal."

The assassination attempt was successful – Vom Rath died on November 9th.

News of Rath's death on November 9 reached Adolf Hitler in Munich, Germany, where he was celebrating the Anniversary of the abortive 1923 Beer Hall Putsch. There, Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels, after conferring with Hitler, harangued a gathering of old storm troopers, urging violent reprisals staged to appear as "spontaneous demonstrations." Telephone orders from Munich triggered pogroms throughout Germany which then included Austria, Sudetenland and Czechoslovakia. Just before midnight on November 9, Gestapo chief Heinrich Mueller sent a telephone call to all police units informing them that "in shortest order, actions against the Jews and especially their synagogues will take place in all of Germany. These are not to be interfered with. Rather the police were to arrest the victims." Fire companies stood by synagogues in flames, with explicit instructions to let the buildings burn. They were to intervene only if a fire threatened adjacent "Aryan" properties.

In 2 days and nights more than 1,000 synagogues were burned or otherwise damaged. Rioters ransacked and looted about 7,500 Jewish businesses, killing at least 91 Jews and vandalized Jewish hospitals, homes, schools and cemeteries. Some 30,000 Jewish males aged 16 to 60 were arrested. To accommodate so many new prisoners, the concentration camps at Dachau, Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen were expanded.

After these pogroms ended, it was given an oddly poetic name: Kristallnacht – meaning “Crystal Night” or night of broken glass. This name symbolized the final shattering of Jewish existence in Germany. After Kristallnacht the Nazi Regime made Jewish survival in Germany impossible.

The cost of the broken window glass alone came to millions of Reichsmarks. The Reich confiscated any compensation claims that Insurance companies paid to Jews. The rubble of ruined synagogues had to be cleaned by the Jewish community. The Nazi Government imposed a collective fine of one billion Reichsmarks (about 400 million in 1938) on the Jewish community. After assessing the fine, Hermann Goering remarked: “The swine won’t commit another murder. Incidentally I would not like to be a Jew in Germany.”

Kristallnacht provided the Nazi Government with an opportunity at last to totally remove Jews from German public life. It was the culminating event in a series of antisemitic policies set in place since Hitler took power in 1933. Within a week Nazis had circulated a letter declaring that Jewish businesses could not be re-opened unless they were to be managed by non-Jews.

On November 15th Jewish children were barred from attending school, and shortly afterwards the Nazis issued a Decree on eliminating the Jews from German economic life, which prohibited Jews from selling goods or services anywhere, in engaging in crafts work, from serving as the managers of any firms, and from being members of co-operatives, and in addition the Nazis determined that the Jews should be liable for the damages caused during Kristallnacht.

The Nazi leadership cynically claimed that the pogrom was not organized in any way, that the Jews themselves had provoked the righteous anger of the people. The Nazis used this as an excuse for further anti-Jewish measures. Jews were ordered to remove the damage caused and to return the streets to their original appearance. Kristallnacht was thus used to speed up the forced Aryanization of Jewish property. The November pogrom of 1938 may thus be considered a symbolic and practical milestone in the Nazis’ anti-Jewish policy. It marked the transition to the complete expulsion of Jews from society and, prospectively to their physical liquidation.

Although the atrocities perpetrated during the Night of Broken Glass did arouse outrage in Western Europe and the United States of America, little concrete action was taken to help the German Jews. At a press conference on November 15th, President Roosevelt said: “The news of the past few days from Germany has deeply shocked public opinion in the US, I myself could scarcely believe that such things could occur in a 20th century civilization.” The President also instructed that the 12,000 to 15,000 refugees already in the US on temporary visas could remain in the country indefinitely.

The following is an extract from Ken Arkwright’s book *Beyond Survival*:

“I was on my way to school and I walked past a Jewish-owned confectionary store. A friendly German policeman who was guarding the vandalized store picked up a handful of chocolates from the street and gave them to me to eat and enjoy. He warned me to make sure that there were no glass splinters in the chocolates.

I was one of the few children arriving at the school. The female teacher sent me straight back home. It was an emotional scene at the school, as the Gestapo had already picked up some of her male colleagues for deportation. Arriving home, my mother sent me into town to look for my father in his business, but I could not find him. The Jewish store where he worked was destroyed, and father, as we

found out later, had gone straight to the insurance company to claim for damages. On the way home, I passed the Neue Synagogue. I had never seen such an inferno. The shouting mob around the synagogue was frightening and intimidating and made me want to return home as quickly as possible. Along the way I passed many ransacked Jewish businesses. One that stood out was a large wine shop. The Nazis must have smashed every bottle of wine in the shop, and the pavement in front of the shop was awash with a mixture of white and red wines, champagne, and liquors. An unforgettable smell."

Kristallnacht was well planned. The synagogues were set alight during the night between Wednesday and Thursday. Sabbath commenced on Friday evening and the ruins of the burned synagogues were still smoldering.

What to do? Should Sabbath services be cancelled? Jews were no longer allowed to hire halls for religious services owned by non-Jews. Breslau had a Jewish association founded on 11 January 1871 called The Association of Friends. This Association of Friends Club building had the largest banquet hall in the inner city of Breslau. It was in this hall that the sabbath eve service was held on Friday 11 November 1938. Was the service to be held in the Jewish Orthodox or in the Jewish Progressive format? The leader of German Jewry, Rabbi Dr Leo Baeck, aptly said at the time: "Orthodox and progressive are merely adjectives, the noun is always Judaism." The hall was packed, and the service was highly emotional. Congregants took stock whose families were still intact and whose were broken. Men and women sat together wherever there was room. History seemed to have repeated itself. The orthodox rabbi Tiktin and the progressive rabbi Manuel Joel had together dedicated the Neue synagogue in 1892, and the progressive rabbi Dr Reinhold Lewin and the orthodox rabbi Hamburger jointly conducted a farewell service for all the destroyed or vandalized Breslau synagogues in 1938.

From Thursday 19 September 1941 onwards the Yellow Star of David had to be worn. It was issued on the 1 September against signing the following receipt: "I acknowledge the receipt of one Jew star. I am aware of all my legal obligations on the wearing of the Jew star and about the prohibition to wear any Orders or Medals. I also understand that I am not allowed to leave my place of residence without the written permission of the local police. I undertake to treat this sign of identification with care, and when sewing it on to my outer garment to fold over the excess material. I further acknowledge receipt of a copy of the above." The bottom of the receipt read: "Neglect will be punished with a fine of 150 German marks or six weeks imprisonment. Security laws allowing for more severe sentences remain unaffected".

The plan of the Nazis to destroy European Jewry was always part of their program. It is interesting to speculate whether the internal and international intrigues associated with Kristallnacht hastened this process, thus preventing many Jews from reaching safety by timely emigration.

The following is a poignant extract from Ken Arkwright's book *Beyond Survival*:

"In 1941 we were fortunate that a very nice Jewish family who had one young son and who we knew well occupied the other room of our two-room apartment in Kopischstrasse 65. It was a dark and dreary morning in 1941 when between 6 and 7am a hammering of fists on the entrance door woke us up. "Open up Gestapo!" My mother opened the door. Two Gestapo officers pushed her aside. "Where are the Jews Korngrün?" They opened the door of the room the Korngrüns occupied without knocking. The family was still in bed. We were ordered to stay in our room. The Korngrüns had to get dressed immediately, pack some essentials, but not more than they could carry, take bread along for a 2 days'

journey, and leave their tools in the entrance hall. Mrs Korngrün was expected to dress herself in the presence of the Gestapo officers. She still had the courage to throw them out of the room for a few minutes. The family was not allowed to lock the toilet door, but only to keep it ajar.

The Gestapo then sealed their room. They were told that they would be resettled in the newly acquired eastern territories of Germany so that they, at long last would have “the opportunity” to do an honest day’s work. Their tools would be collected later and the contents of their room would be sent to them in due course. It was not an implausible story, as some elderly Breslau Jews had already been moved into transit camps in the close-by country areas.

I had to accompany the Korngrüns to help carry their luggage. By tram under Gestapo guard, we went to the local dance hall, where already many Jewish families were assembled. The Korngrüns seemed to be a little more at ease meeting so many fellow Jews.

Their six-year-old son Heini cried inconsolably. His teddy bear had been left behind. His mother begged me to get it so that she could comfort Heini on the journey ahead. I went back home and found the teddy bear in the entrance hall. I went back again to the hall and what a joy it was for the child to be reunited with his teddy bear and to find comfort from it.

The tools were never collected. Gestapo records show that the transport left Breslau on Friday 21 November 1941. It was destined for Riga. However, it was intercepted on Tuesday 25 November 1941 in Kaunas, and 693 men, 1155 women and 152 children, a total of 2000 Breslau Jews were shot in this city on that day. Maybe the teddy bear was of some comfort before a bullet ended Heini Korngrün’s young life.”

How many more atrocities could befall the Jews since this poignant story?

How could the Jewish communities have foreseen what was to be their fate not long after Kristallnacht?

Thus, Kristallnacht was a turning point in the history of the Third Reich, marking the shift from antisemitic rhetoric and legislation to the violent, aggressive antisemitic measures that would culminate eventually with the Holocaust.

Judith Arkwright

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