

Kristallnacht, the 83rd Commemoration



Burning Synagogue, Germany, November 10, 1938

November 9th, 2021, marks the 83st commemoration of Kristallnacht – “the night of broken glass” – in 1938, when Hitler perpetrated a nation-wide pogrom against Germany’s Jews in response to the assassination of a German diplomat Ernst Von Rath at the Paris Embassy by a 17-year-old Polish Jew Herschel Grynszpan. The Nazi SA and Hitler youth rampaged through Germany and Austria 7,500 Jewish homes and businesses were ransacked, 267 synagogues were attacked, 76 were destroyed, 100 Jews were killed. Most significantly 30,000 Jewish men were taken to Nazi concentration camps at Dachau, Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen. German Jews were fined over \$400 million for the cleanup of the Nazi pogrom. It marked the end for Jews in Germany. Many consider it as the precursor for Hitler’s Final Solution, the murder of six million European Jewish men, women and children in unspeakable ways.

On this Veterans’ Day weekend in 2021, Kristallnacht is personally entwined with eyewitness testimony of the parents of a roommate at Boston University with whom I shared a triple my first year. His parents were survivors of the Nazi pogrom. His father was a cattle dealer in Wurzburg, Germany and until the enactment of the notorious 1935 Nuremberg racial laws was captain of the town’s soccer team. His mother was a beautiful blonde blue-eyed Jew. Following the Nazi orgy of judenhaus, Jew hatred, on Kristallnacht, my roommate’s father, like thousands of other German Jewish men, was detained and sent to Sachsenhausen concentration camp. It was only through the intervention and bribery of the camp’s Nazi SS officials by my roommate’s mother that her husband was freed and via sponsorship of relatives in America they were among the fortunate German Jews to have escaped the Holocaust. That experience was not lost on my roommate. He signed up for US Air Force ROTC and following graduation went through flight training to become a pilot serving during Vietnam and retiring with the rank of Colonel.

As to what prompted Herschel Grynszpan to undertake his

desperate act , a *Jerusalem Post* opinion by 98 year old Walter Bingham, provides an answer, ["83 Years after Kristallnacht, anti-Semitism is Rising"](#).

As German policy then was not yet mass extermination but to get Jews out of Germany, the Nazi regime was concerned when Polish officials would not stamp the passports of Jews, thus making all of them stateless. Because without passports they would have to remain in Germany, SS chief Himmler ordered that all Polish Jews be at once and forcefully deported to Poland.

It was during the early hours of October 28 that the Polish Jews had to respond to the dreaded knock on the door that spelled terror. 20,000 Jewish men, women and children were arrested, allowed to hurriedly pack just one suitcase, and with an allowance of just 10 marks, transported to the Polish border in sealed trains. When the Poles became aware of this, they closed the border. "No Jews" was the order.

With Polish bayonets facing them and German machine guns behind them, these Jews were stranded helplessly in no-man's-land. The Jewish welfare organization ORT was allowed to hastily erect some shelter, while the Poles and Germans argued for three days. The conditions for these Jews were grim and food was short. Eventually, the Poles were forced to accept this increasingly dejected, hungry and tired mass.

The largest number were held in Zbaszyn, a Polish border town. My father was among them. For months they slept in poorly constructed sheds and stables, with very few provisions. The severity of the conditions was witnessed by Polish historian Emanuel Ringelblum, who described the hopelessness of the deportees in a letter to a colleague: "I do not think any Jewish community has ever experienced so cruel and merciless an expulsion as this one. The future is envisaged in desperate terms. Jews have been humiliated to the level of lepers, to fourth-class citizens, and as a result, we are all affected by this tragedy."

Some months later most were transported to [Warsaw](#).

At that time, I was in a Jewish school in a city 70 km. north of my hometown. The categories of arrest were decided by the local Nazi chief, so my mother was spared on that day. Fortunately, she survived the concentration camps and could relate the events to me.

When asked where I was, she said I had gone out and she did not know where I was. Had I been at home, I too would have suffered the same fate and would not be here to relate the story.

Among those deported was the Grynszpan family from Hanover. Their 17-year-old son, Hershel, was living illegally in Paris. His sister, Berta, was able to send him a postcard from Zbaszyn, which detailed the cruelty and tragedy of the family's forced relocation. Enraged and distressed by the plight of his family and the thousands of other Polish Jews, Hershel Grynszpan went to the German Embassy in Paris asking to see the ambassador. He was taken to third Secretary Ernst vom Rath, and as he faced him, Hershel drew a pistol and shot him. Vom Rath died of his wounds on November 7.

That was the trigger for the "spontaneous" events of Kristallnacht two nights later.

Plans for this crime had already been laid by Himmler in detail and communicated to all Nazi offices in the country, and that he only waited for a suitable occasion to implement it.

On that fateful November 10 morning, even before I arrived at my school that was on the premises of a synagogue, smoke hung in the air and there was more activity than usual in the streets. Then I saw it all. The fire service was in attendance, not to douse the flames that engulfed the synagogue, but to cool and protect neighboring German property from being damaged.

On that same day I left the city of Mannheim to return to my home. The day is so vividly etched in my memory that I remember distinctly that I took the 3:22 diesel train. Ask me what I had for lunch yesterday and I would have difficulty remembering.

One other fact worth mentioning. After the synagogue fires in my hometown, remaining walls of one of the synagogues constituted a danger to the public, and to add insult to injury, the Jewish community was “asked” to pay for the demolition.

When Hershel Grynszpan was arrested by French police he protested: “Being a Jew is not a crime; I am not a dog; I have a right to exist on this earth; wherever I have been I was hounded like an animal.”

There are conflicting reports about his fate, but it can be safely assumed that he did not survive the war. Let us never forget the brave Hershel Grynszpan and the events that befell our people.

What was the reaction of other nations was to Kristallnacht-the British and especially FDR in the US? A 2018 book by Rafael Medoff, Executive Director of the David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies, [*The Jews Should Keep Quiet: Franklin D. Roosevelt, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, and the Holocaust*](#) reveals the sorrowful record. The government of Munich appeaser, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain allowed the famous Kindertransports that brought 10,000 Austrian, Czech and German Jewish children below the age of 15 to obtain sanctuary in England. Then there were the 15,000 young German Jewish women who entered England as maids and nannies. This contrasts with the 1939 British White Paper denying European Jewish immigration to Palestine

But what were the FDR Administration's actions to save Jews following Kristallnacht?

FDR's responses to Kristallnacht at a press conference after the Nazi pogrom called it "unbelievable" without finding the Hitler regime perpetrators, not even naming the victims- Jews. This contrasted with headlines in US and foreign newspapers drawing attention to the Nazi existential threats to Germany's Jews. FDR's State Department even ruled against offers by the Governor of the US Virgin Islands to take in German Jewish refugees. Medoff pointed out the little-known offer from the Dominican Republic, made earlier than Kristallnacht in 1938, to take in over 100,000 German Jews. In the end they took in less than 1,000 in the settlement of Sosua. The FDR Administration was concerned that these German Jewish refugees would infiltrate the US! That was reflected less than seven months later in June 1939 when the 930 German Jews aboard the fateful ship the St. Louis were barred entry by the State Department, many of whom went to their deaths in Nazi killing centers. Medoff noted FDR did not want strong action against Hitler's Germany for fear of triggering a war and affecting trade during the economic Depression. Hollywood's Jewish moguls did not want to lose export markets in Germany for film productions. Most Jewish leaders remained silent for fear of anti-Semitism, while few demonstrated against the Hitler Nazi regime. The FDR White House followed that with lobbying against a Congressional bill in 1939 to let in 20,000 German Jewish youths below the age of 15. An act, which if passed, that would have saved both Ann and Margo Frank, who were eligible. The only concession made by the FDR Administration was to have 5,000 German Jews who held valid tourist visas to remain here.

Where did the title of Medoff's book, "The Jews Should Keep Quiet" come from? In March 1943, a protest march by 400 Orthodox Rabbis at the White House was organized by the five Palestinian Revisionist Jews of the Bergson Group with a petition calling for rescue of Europe's Jews. President FDR's private assimilated Jewish advisers suggested ignoring the protest, while the President left via a back entrance avoiding

meeting with the Rabbis. The Rabbis were outraged which led to others to express criticism. But not Rabbi Wise, the revered American Jewish leader who was told "The Jews should keep quiet".

FDR's opposition to wartime European Jewish rescue came in the face of a major shift in US public opinion from the 1930's to the 1940's during WWII. With growing allied victories at Stalingrad, North Africa, Sicily and the surrender of Italy in 1943, public opinion in the US overwhelmingly favored unlimited numbers of Jews to temporarily reside in the US. In April 1944, the FDR White House commissioned a Gallup poll that found that 70 percent approved this policy. The reality was that FDR admitted less than 982 European and Jewish refugees in 1944 housed at an abandoned US Army Camp in Oswego, New York.

But what about the controversy over the allied air forces bombing the approaches, rail network and especially the bridges leading to the Auschwitz – Birkenau killing center? Here too, the Roosevelt Administration said, 'it would divert resources for ending the war against Nazi Germany". As late as early 1944, 800,000 Hungarian Jews could have been rescued, before the country was occupied by the Nazis. In less than 90 days from May to July, 1944, more than 333,000 Hungarian Jews were murdered at the Auschwitz-Birkenau killing center. Medoff suggests that this and other opportunities were squandered by FDR. Medoff points to excuses of critics who said that it would have resulted in casualties of killing center inmates. These critics pointed out German resilience in repairing bombed rails. However, Medoff noted that requests to bomb bridges betrayed those facts that Allied air forces bombed them, as they were difficult to repair, denying transit of troops and equipment. Bombing the bridges along the deportation route to Auschwitz might have saved tens of thousands of Jewish lives.

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