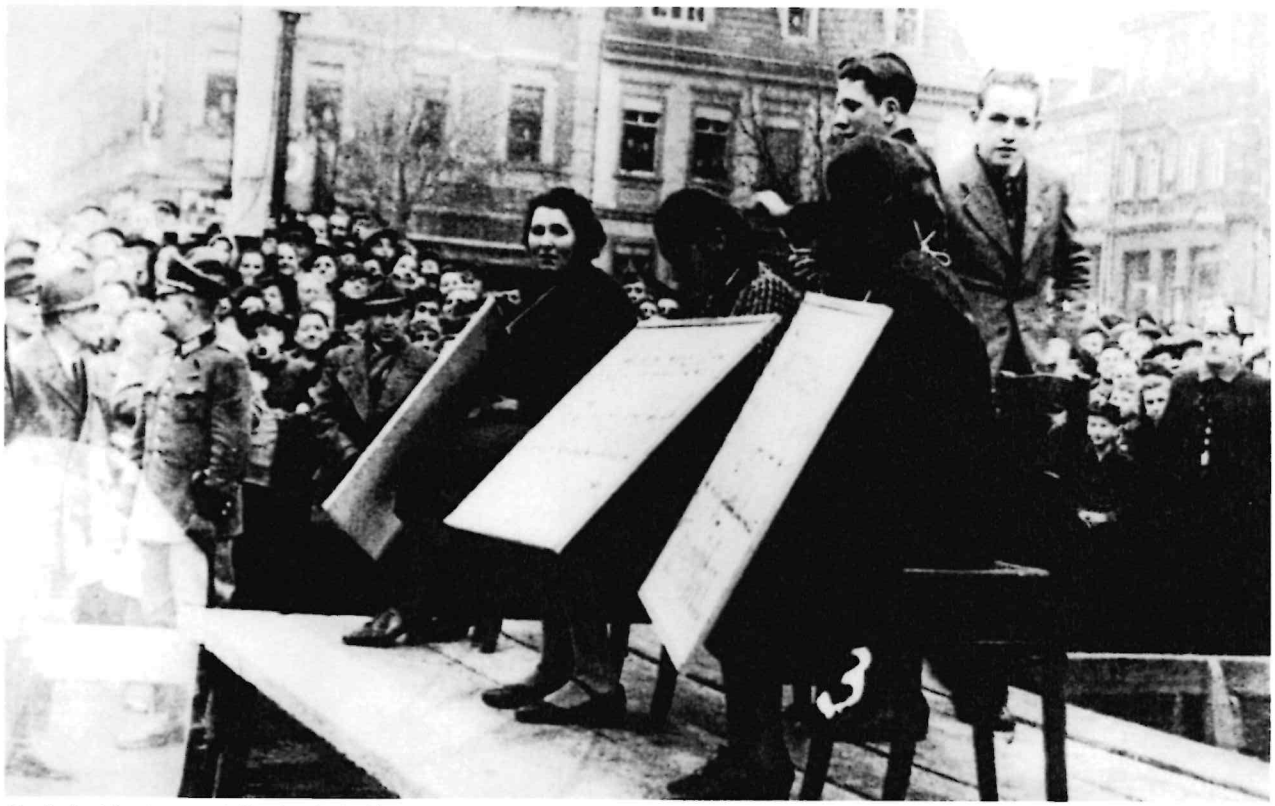
'THE LAST FEW MONTHS HAVE COMPLETELY CHANGED ME'

Once lost to history, Kristallnacht testimonies describe pogrom's aftermath

Compiled by a Harvard sociologist but not published until 2012, essays in the collection 'Night of Broken Glass' take readers beyond ravaged storefronts and burning synagogues

By MATT LEBOVIC | 9 November 2021, 11:42 pm



After the Kristallnacht pogrom in Linz, Austria, Jewish women are made to wear signs saying, 'I am not part of the national community,' while being humiliated on stage in public (public domain)

Kristallnacht evokes images of shattered storefronts and synagogues set ablaze. By way of contrast, a collection of once-unpublished testimony conveys the personal impact of the Nazi pogrom on Jews who fled Germany in its wake.

Almost lost to history, the Kristallnacht testimonies were gathered by sociologist and Harvard professor Edward Y. Hartshorne after the notorious "Night of Broken Glass" on November 9 and 10, 1938. Throughout 1939, Hartshorne gathered 250 essays from eyewitnesses who fled Germany, Austria, and the Sudetenland.

"This year is coming to an end," wrote Berlin physician Hertha Nathorff in her journal a few weeks after Kristallnacht. "It has taken away from me everything that made my life happy and fortunate. The last few months have completely changed me."

Nathorff wrote about having to hide her son in someone else's apartment so he would not be arrested. Soon after Kristallnacht, she took to wandering the streets to avoid her own arrest.

"I'm just counting the days until we can get out of this hell," wrote Nathorff, echoing the sentiments of other survivors in the volume.

As survivor essays streamed in to Hartshorne, the professor started to work on an anti-Nazi book called, "Nazi Madness: November 1938." Before he could complete the testimony-based book, however, Hartshorne was recruited to the United States Secret Service and the volume never materialized.

Jews rounded up in Stadthagen after Kristallnacht (public domain)

Twenty-one of the essays originally selected by Hartshorne were included in "The Night of Broken Glass: Eyewitness Accounts of Kristallnacht," published in hardcover in 2012. The writings had been tucked away in boxes at Harvard for more than seven decades. A new edition of the volume was released in paperback this fall.

The book is divided into sections for Kristallnacht, "The Camps," and "Before Emigration," with a foreword by Holocaust historian Saul Friedlander. Because Hartshorne solicited diverse perspectives for his study of National Socialism, there are several testimonies from non-Jewish eyewitnesses.

'They preferred a quick death'

During Kristallnacht, about 40,000 Jewish men in Germany, Austria and the Sudetenland were arrested and imprisoned in concentration camps. Most of them were released and forced to emigrate, but hundreds were murdered or committed suicide at Buchenwald, Dachau, or Sachsenhausen.

When Karl Rosenthal was taken to Sachsenhausen, north of Berlin, he and other Jewish prisoners were met with 48 hours of brutality administered by SS staff.

German Nazi propaganda photo of disabled Jews taken at Buchenwald, where thousands of Jews were imprisoned after Kristallnacht (public domain)

"SS men armed with batons and whips attacked us," wrote Rosenthal, a rabbi in Berlin's Reform community. "Amid wild shouts and curses, they beat us mercilessly, on the back, on the legs, on the head and face."

For two days, the men endured beatings and other humiliations. When they were at last alone in the barracks to rest, a man started to play songs on his accordion, recalled Rosenthal.

"We no longer believed that anyone could exist here who would want to provide us with a little joy," wrote Rosenthal. "For a few moments we heard, in the hell of the concentration camp, the VOICE OF HUMANITY!"

Austrian SA troops keep Jews out of the University of Vienna following Kristallnacht (public domain)

While the out-of-place music helped some men find "inner strength," wrote Rosenthal, other men quietly left the barracks and were found hanging from the camp's electrified fences at dawn.

"They preferred a quick death to slow Nazi torture," wrote Rosenthal, who had served in Germany's army with distinction during World War I.

In addition to more than 90 Jews murdered in their homes or on the streets during Kristallnacht, hundreds of Jews took their own lives that night and in the days after. Some of them wanted to avoid concentration camps, while others could not cope with the loss of a loved one.

Jews deported from Baden Baden after Kristallnacht in Germany, 1938 (public domain)

In Nuremberg, the Nazi party's rallying ground, Jewish attorney Rudolf Bing heard about numerous Jews committing suicide, including people in his circle of family and friends.

"In the street alone where my wife's friend's husband was killed, three other men had been beaten to death," wrote Bing. "Everywhere, we heard of people who had committed suicide in despair."

According to Bing, 300 Jewish men were arrested in Nuremberg that night. All men under age 58 were imprisoned in Dachau.

In Baden Baden, Germany, Jews are forced to march with 'God does not forgive us' signs after Kristallnacht (public domain)

"If I tried to describe the consequences of that night for my immediate circle of acquaintances, I would have to write a whole book about them," wrote Bing.

In his testimony, Bing recorded some of the insults shouted at Jews that night, including, "Go drown your child in the Jordan," and "There you have the revenge for Paris," blaming Jews for the assassination of vom Rath.

From the Jewish hospital, recounted Bing, men were taken from sickbeds for transport to Dachau. Some of them died in the process; others were beaten to death on the road.

'The honor of the German people'

Most eyewitness accounts in the book have examples of Germans or Austrians expressing sympathy for Jewish neighbors. In some of the most jarring essays, a detailed description of Kristallnacht was followed by the reaction of "sympathetic" German neighbors.

Prisoners at the German concentration camp Buchenwald, where thousands of Jews were incarcerated after Kristallnacht in 1938 (public domain)

Vienna-born Jew Fritz Rodeck wrote a district-by-district account of Kristallnacht in Vienna, where the pogrom was particularly atrocious. He described Jewish homes destroyed in each district and Jews who were tossed out of windows. Throughout the city, Jews were forced to demolish synagogues under gunpoint.

"By the end of 1938, there were few Jews left in Vienna who had not themselves been in a concentration camp or who had one or more relatives or friends who had been in one," wrote Rodeck, who called Kristallnacht the "illegal" pogrom and its aftermath the "legal" pogrom.

During the "legal" pogrom that winter, Rodeck wrote, Jews were forced to pay "atonement contributions" and other taxes meant to despoil them. In contrast to the years prior to Kristallnacht, Jews now sought to emigrate from Germany as quickly as possible. Nazi bigwig Hermann Goering was put in charge of robbing them on the way out.

The Old Synagogue in Aachen, Germany, after Kristallnacht (public domain)

In the second half of his account, Rodeck described some of the non-Jews who offered sympathy and assistance, including help fleeing Germany.

"[Our non-Jewish neighbors] were all ashamed and deeply depressed, and one got the impression that they had a guilty conscience and feared the power of a higher justice, as certain individuals quite openly said," wrote Rodeck. "These people saved, as much as that was possible, the honor of the German people."

Some Kristallnacht survivors wrote that propaganda minister Josef Goebbels was behind the pogrom, which was branded by the party as a spontaneous "Night of the People's Indignation." In fact, Hitler and Goebbels secretly planned the pogrom together in Munich, with measures taken to conceal the party's involvement.

Potsdamer Platz in Berlin, with pro-Hitler advertisements (public domain)

Some of the testimonies are more emotionally visceral than others. For example, attorney Martin Freudenheim wrote about a post-Kristallnacht incident where his anger reached a boiling point.

While in Berlin's Potsdamer Platz, Freudenheim attempted to visit his favorite coffeeshop. On the door, however, hung the sign, "Jews not welcome." Suddenly, the middle-aged attorney was overwhelmed by "uneasiness and revulsion" at living in Germany, he wrote.

"I was worn out, nervous, and thirsty," wrote Freudenheim. "Then I noticed disgust rising in me and that I was in danger of losing control of myself and doing something stupid. It was then that I decided to emigrate as soon as I could to Palestine."

'Kindertransport' following Kristallnacht, when faith-based organizations in the UK lobbied for the entry of Jewish children as refugees. (public domain)