# The Night of the Pogrom

*This reading comes from the resource [Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior](https://www.facinghistory.org/for-educators/educator-resources/resources/facing-history-and-ourselves-holocaust-and-human-behavior) (https://www.facinghistory.org/for-educators/educator-resources/resources/facing-history-and-ourselves-holocaust-and-human-behavior).*

## Introduction

At Evian, the delegate from Colombia raised a fundamental question, "Can a state, without upsetting the basis of our civilisation, and indeed, of all civilisation, arbitrarily withdraw nationality from a whole class of its citizens, thereby making them stateless persons whom no country is compelled to receive on its territory"? It was a question that went unanswered that July. By November, the failure to answer it would lead to yet another crisis.

---

Throughout 1938, Hitler and his top officials accelerated their campaign against his primary enemy, the Jews. The first step was the mandatory "Aryanization" of Jewish businesses. Up until then, it was voluntary. But now the Nazis required that all Jewish-owned companies be sold to "Aryans," usually at a fraction of their value. Then in June, the Nazis rounded up Jews "previously convicted" of crimes to remove the "criminal element" from the population. Although many were guilty of nothing more than a traffic violation, about five hundred men described as "antisocial" were sent to a concentration camp at Buchenwald, a town near Weimar, Germany.

By In August, a new law required that all Jews have a "Jewish first name" by January 1, 1939. If the name chosen was not on a list of approved "Jewish first names," the Nazis would add "Israel" to the man's name and "Sarah" to the woman's. In September, the government announced that Jewish lawyers could no longer practice their profession. A month later, at the request of Switzerland, which was bombarded by Jews trying to leave Germany, the Nazis began to mark the passport of every Jew with the letter J. The Nazis then turned their attention to Jews who were not German citizens. Their first target was Russian Jews.

After the Nazis expelled every Jew who held a Russian passport, the Polish government feared that Jews with Polish passports would be next. To keep them from returning to Poland, the nation required that they secure a special stamp for their passports. The order affected about seventy thousand Jews living in Germany. Although few wanted to return to Poland, they needed passports to emigrate to any other nation. Yet when they tried to get the required stamp, Polish officials turned them away. The crisis came

to a head when the Polish government announced that October 31 was the last day it would issue stamps. On October 26, the Nazis responded by expelling all Polish Jews. When Poland refused to accept them, thousands of men, women, and children ended up in refugee camps near the German-Polish border. Among them were the parents of seventeen-year-old Herschel Grynszpan.

Grynszpan was living in France at the time. Angry and frustrated by his inability to help his family, he marched into the German Embassy in Paris on November 7 and shot a Nazi official. When the man died two days later, the Germans decided to avenge his death. The night of November 9-10 came to be known as Kristallnacht ("Night of the Broken Glass") outside Germany and as the Night of the Pogrom within the nation. That night the Nazis looted and then destroyed thousands of Jewish homes and businesses in every part of the country. They set fire to 191 synagogues, killed over ninety Jews, and sent thirty thousand others to concentration camps.

Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's minister of propaganda, held a press conference the next day. He told reporters that Kristallnacht was not a government action but a "spontaneous" expression of German dissatisfaction with the Jews. "It is an intolerable state of affairs that within our borders and for all these years hundreds of thousands of Jews still control whole streets of shops, populate our recreation spots and, as foreign apartment owners, pocket the money of German tenants, while their racial comrades abroad agitate for war against Germany and gun down German officials." Two days later, the government fined the Jewish community one billion marks for "property damaged in the rioting."

Frederic Morton, a writer whose family fled from Vienna shortly after Kristallnacht, never forgot that night.

> The day began with a thudding through my pillow. Jolts waked me. Then, like an alarm clock, the doorbell rang. It was six in the morning. My father, my mother, my little brother and I all met in the foyer, all in our robes. We did not know yet exactly what. But we knew. We were Jews in Vienna in 1938. Everything in our lives, including our beds, stood on a cliff. My father opened the door on Frau Eckel, the janitress.
>
> "They are down there...they are throwing things." She turned away. Went on with her morning sweep. Her broom trembled.
>
> We looked down into the courtyard. Pink-cheeked storm troopers chatted and whistled. Chopped-up furniture flew through the window.
>
> The troopers fielded the pieces sportively, piled them into heaps. One hummed something from "The Merry Widow."

“Franz! Run somewhere!” my mother said to my father.

By that time we’d gone to the window facing the street. At the house entrance two storm troopers lit cigarettes for each other. Their comrades were smashing the synagogue on the floor below us, tossing out a debris of Torahs and pews.

“Oh, my God!” my mother said.

Something overwhelming wanted to melt down my eyes. I couldn’t let it. All this might not be real as long as real tears did not touch my face. A crazy last-resort bargain with fate.

“All right,” my father said. “Meanwhile we get dressed.”

Meanwhile meant until they come up here. No other Jews lived in the building. It had no back door. But as long as I could keep my tears down, I could keep them down. While they were destroying down there, they would not come up here. As long as the shaking of the floor continued, the axe blows, the sledgehammer thuds, we might live. I had gym for my first class. I laced on my sneakers. I knew I never would see school that morning. I didn’t care that I knew. I only cared not to cry. I tried to pour my entire mind into the lacing of my sneakers.

We met in the living room. We saw each other dressed with a normality made grotesque by the crashing of the perdition downstairs. It stopped. The shaking and the thudding stopped. Silence. A different sound. Heavy, booted steps ascending. I relaced my sneakers.

My father had put on his hat. “Everybody come close to me,” he said. “My two sons, you put your hands on top of your heads.” We put our hands on top of our heads, as hats. My father put his arms around all our shoulders, my mother’s, my brother’s, mine.

“Shema Yisroel,” my father said. “Repeat after me: Shema Yisroel AdonoyElohenu Adonoy Ehod... ” [“Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is One...”]

The doorbell rang. Once. Ever since the Anschluss, we’d rung our doorbell twice in quick succession to signal that this was a harmless ringing, not the dreaded one. Now the dreaded ring had come.

“Hansi, you go,” my father said.

“No!” my mother said.

“Hansi is the only one they might not hurt on sight,” my father said. “Hansi, go.”

My brother, a tiny blond eight-year-old, an Aryan-looking doll, went.

A minute later he returned. Behind him towered some 10 storm troopers with heavy pickaxes. They were young and bright-faced with excitement. Ten bridegrooms on their wedding day. One had freckles. How could a freckle-faced man kill us? The freckles kept me from crying.

“House search,” the leader said. “Don’t move.”

We all stood against the wall, except my father. He placed himself, hat still on, a foot in front of us.

They yanked out every drawer in every one of our chests and cupboards, and tossed each in the air. They let the cutlery jangle across the floor, the clothes scatter, and stepped over the mess to fling the next drawer. Their exuberance was amazing. Amazing, that none of them raised an axe to split our skulls.

“We might be back,” the leader said. On the way out he threw our mother-of-pearl ashtray over his shoulder, like confetti. We did not speak or move or breathe until we heard their boots against the pavement.

“I am going to the office,” my father said. “Breitel might help.”

Breitel, the Reich commissar in my father’s costume-jewelry factory, was a “good” Nazi. Once he’d said we should come to him if there was trouble. My father left. My mother was crying, with relief, with terror; she cradled against herself my little stunned brother. I turned away from her. I swore I would do something other than cry.

I began to pick up clothes, when the doorbell rang again. It was my father.

“I have two minutes.”

“What?” my mother said. But she knew. His eyes had become glass. “There was another crew waiting for me downstairs. They gave me two minutes.”

Now I broke down. Now my father was the only one not crying. His eyes were blue glass, relentlessly dry. His kiss felt stubbly. He had not shaved this morning.

After one more embrace with my mother he marched to the door, turned on his heel, called out.

“Fritz!”

I went to him, sobbing.

“Stop!”

I couldn’t stop.

Harshly his hands came down on my shoulders.

“If I don’t come back – avenge me!”

He was gone. The fury of his fingers stung. It burned into my skin a sense of continuity against all odds. I stopped.

Four months later he rang our doorbell twice, skull shaven, skeletal, released from Dachau, somehow alive.

Forty years later, today, he is practicing the tango with my mother in Miami Beach. My little brother Hansi is chairman of the political science department at Queens College. I am a writer in America with an American family. We are atypically lucky. But to this day we all ring our American doorbells twice.[1]

---

## Connections

1. The Germans call Kristallnacht the “Night of the Pogrom.” A pogrom is a government organized or inspired massacre of a minority group, particularly of Jews. It is a Russianword that literally means “riot” or “destruction.” Over one hundred years ago, the nobles of St. Petersburg demanded that the “people’s wrath” be vented against the Jews. The peasants in the nearby town of Elizanetgrad responded with the first pogrom in modern times. A Russian writer has described the subsequent murders, rapes, and looting as the “unending torture” of a religious and ethnic minority.
   Was Kristallnacht a pogrom? What evidence suggests it was planned? That the murder of the Nazi official was an excuse for a riot not its cause?
2. At the time of the first pogrom, the Russian government blamed the Jews for the violence. Whom did the Germans blame? Are victims ever to blame for violence committed against them?

3. Morton was an eyewitness to the events of Kristallnacht. How does his account differ from the official view? What insights does he offer as to why many Jews saw Kristallnacht as a turning point?
4. Edwin Landau (Chapter 4, Reading 4) said of the Nazis' boycott of Jewish businesses in 1933, "To me the whole thing was inconceivable. It would not sink in that something like that could even be possible in the twentieth century, for such things had happened, at most, in the Middle Ages." How do you think someone like Landau would have responded to this new outrage? Would he have been as shocked in 1938 as he was in 1933? Trace the steps that led to Kristallnacht. How did each prepare the public for state-sanctioned violence against a minority within the nation? What attitudes and values allowed people to remain silent when their neighbors were deprived of citizenship?
5. What is the significance of the name Kristallnacht? How does the name cloud the factthat it was more a night of broken lives than of broken glass?

---

**End Notes**

1. Frederic Morton, "Kristallnach," New York Times, 10 November 1978, Op-Ed page. Copyright © 1978 by the New York Times Company.

**Additional Resources**

Peter Gay, a Jewish teenager in Berlin during the 1930s, reflects on the way Kristallnacht differed from earlier events that targeted Jews in Elements of Time, pages 103-105. Joan B. in the video montage Friedrich describes how it altered life for her family and contributed to the death of her parents. The video is available from the Facing History Resource Center. A study guide on Kristallnachtis also available.

Connect with Facing History

Copyright © 2014 Facing History and Ourselves. Facing History and Ourselves is a registered 501 (c)(3) charity.

Privacy Policy