

2008 05 28 Kristallnacht The Beginning of the Tragedy

92nd Street Y Elie Wiesel Archive

Elie Wiesel:

(applause) In evoking a drama that occurred 70 years ago, we shall talk about vengeance. What is vengeance? What is its role? What is its place? What are its limits? Individual vengeance, collective vengeance, when is it justified? Is suffering individual or collective, a reason valid enough to provoke an act of vengeance? So therefore tonight we shall speak about it as we shall evoke Kristall Night. Let's begin with a burning moral question [00:01:00] that actually has its reverberation in contemporary life. In some places of the world, violence has attained such limits and going beyond them that we cannot not face the possibility of vengeance playing a role.

Does, an individual man or woman have the right on their own without almost consulting any political or moral authority to commit an individual act that could endanger and harm others, many others, even an entire community? Granted, some of them may obey the voice of their conscience. They believe they are doing the right thing, [00:02:00] but is that a reason good enough? Now, we know it happened early, nearly 70 years ago in

the fall of 1938 in Paris. A young Jewish adolescent, thinking he could accomplish the unknown will of Jewish history, entered it with sound and fury.

His name, Herschel Grynszpan. He saw himself in the role of prosecutor, judge, and avenger. And so he felt it was incumbent upon him to execute, kill, a German diplomat whom he had never met. His deed caused the shedding of Jewish blood in the land where the enemies of our people were looking for a pretext to publicly curse, [00:03:00] ostracize, terrorize, torment, punish, humiliate, rob, and destroy a Jewish community which was then the loneliest and more threatened in the world. The event has been called, poetically, paradoxically, the night of broken glass, Kristallnacht, or Kristall Night. And it happened in Hitler's Germany.

Well, Joseph Goebbels, the genius of evil hatred whose underlings always managed to find grandiose and lofty words to better height unspeakable atrocities. Was Herschel Grynszpan right in allowing his wrath to become an act of vengeance? As I said, this year in the fall will mark the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of [00:04:00] that event. It was forgotten in recent years, especially since it coincides with the fall of the Berlin Wall. And therefore, we chose to recall it now is actually to prepare,

I hope, a kind of atmosphere or ambience for next November. Years ago in New York when the wall of Berlin came down it was a great victory for democracy.

Berlin opened its gates. Communism abdicated. And the whole world celebrated that victory. I then felt worried. I was afraid that the victory of November 7, 89 [00:05:00] now will overshadow, therefore, the memory of the tragedy of 1938. And I wrote in the *New York Times* an op-ed piece which reads like as follows: "Like most people who abhor forced separation and oppression, I am happy for the citizens of East Berlin and for those of West Berlin. Watching on television the tens of thousands of young Germans celebrate freedom was a moving and rewarding experience.

"Whenever and wherever liberty is victorious, people everywhere ought to rejoice. The wall was a disgrace, an abomination, its murderous shadow a nightmare. Most of the faces we saw on the screen were young. One couldn't but feel for them and with them. Their parents and [00:06:00] grandparents had placed heavy burdens and dark complexes on their shoulders. It was not easily for young Germans to grow up wondering, what did my father do during the war? They deserve, these young people deserve a chance to begin again, I thought. No one ought to

begrudge their exuberance. They are entitled to their day in the sun, and one ought not to spoil it.

"The fact that it happened in Berlin, in a way, lent the remarkable event a special meaning. What was 50 years ago history's capital of absolute evil has so suddenly become a symbol of hope. If this is possible, I thought, why despair of seeing a similar occurrence in other areas of the world, the Middle East, for example? Then, as always, emotions gave way to political considerations. Commentators and analysts [00:07:00] began asking obvious questions. What next? Will this unexpected turn of events lead to a reunification of Germany? If so, when? And what will the impact be on the international scene?

Will a united, powerful new Germany manage to break away from the conqueror's thirsty demons that dominated old Germany? I cannot hide the fact that the Jew in me is troubled, even worried, I wrote then. Whenever Germany was too powerful it fell pray to perilous temptations of ultranationalism. Does it mean that I do not trust Germany's youth? I do. I hope it will have learned the lessons of World War II and will be shielded by that memory, but as long as the old generation is still around, one must be vigilant, on the alert. Remember, [00:08:00]

reactionary anti-Semitic journals are still being published in Germany.

Former SS men still have their own associations. One of their leaders has been elected to high office in Berlin. The general trend points towards normalization in political awareness and history as well. Remember the battle of the historians and Bitburg and Chana Klein's shocking statement justifying it. Remember it. So, in other words, what is happening in Berlin troubles me because of its possible effort not only on the future but also on the past. In fact, the past has already been affected. November 9 will enter history, is what the mayor of West Berlin declared.

Others echoed his statement in every media around the globe. They forgot that November 9 had already entered history 51 years earlier [00:09:00] as a date marking the Kristall Night. Everyone else had forgotten it too. The intense joy of the present has overshadowed the past. No one in Berlin or in our own country, for that matter, made the connection. That is why I am worried. I wonder what else will be forgotten.

This was written when the Berlin wall came down. And it's true all of a sudden it disappeared from our awareness. Earlier the

Kristall Night was observed every year, even here at the Y. And then it disappeared. That is why I chose the topic for tonight. In a way, I believe that whatever must be done will be done to awaken [00:10:00] our people, all people to what happened in the past, and what happened in the past then was not glorious. And so we shall speak about it, as soon as the usual or unusual late comers will come.

As always, whenever we deal with any essential question, we return to the sources of our memory, which means not only the present but also the distant past is important to us. So when we -- we ask the question related to Herschel Grynszpan, the man who committed the act in Paris. Actually, this question could be addressed to many heroes of the past. Did they have the right to do what they have done? For instance, a man named Mordechai, Mordechai the Just, who is a [00:11:00] hero in the Book of Esther, who is a hero in Jewish history because he and Esther, his niece, have saved the entire Jewish community of 127 provinces in Persia then.

Now, the fact is that he behaved in a very strange way. True, he was a man of integrity, a man of courage. But hadn't he been, in a way, in his own way, Herschel Grynszpan's forerunner or pathfinder? Remember, in those times, some 2,500 years ago,

Jews had a good life in the capitol city of Persia, Shushan. Nobody threatened them. Nobody maligned them. Nobody oppressed them. They were respected citizens of a huge empire. Some [00:12:00] Jewish dignitary had useful connections in the highest spheres of government. They were honored guests in what was then the White House, the imperial palace.

When King Ahasuerus decided to give a state dinner they were invited to the festive event, and they came, and they drank. All was well when a certain Haman rose to power. If he was an anti-Semite, no one knew about it. There was nothing in his political or social program to indicate that he hated Jews or anyone else. He loved power, and he got it. No special anti-Jewish legislation, no racism. No synagogue was burned, no school closed, no discrimination, no quota. Haman's decree forcing the inhabitants to bow before him [00:13:00] didn't single out the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It affected everyone. He simply wanted to show his power, and therefore he wanted everyone to show that they fear him, they respect him, they worship him, that he's different, superior.

Everything was okay until Mordechai appeared on the stage. He was a loyal and proud Jew, Mordechai *HaYehudi*, said the text. He obeyed the law of Moses and simply refused to bow before any

arrogant human being, be it Jewish or not. He wouldn't bow. Normally he could have practiced his Judaism at home, eating kosher, observing the Sabbath. No. Instead of doing it by avoiding [00:14:00] public places he had to show his audacity. He wanted to prove to others who he was. He wanted to be seen by all people who entered the gates of the palace.

Did he at least hide when Haman arrived, not to provoke him? No, quite the opposite. He wanted to be seen by Haman. He wanted to provoke Haman. Now, why did he behave like that? Didn't he know that the new all-powerful ruler would be hurt, offended, angry, furious, and it's dangerous to provoke a man who has such power and such passion for power? And didn't he think that maybe because of his pride other Jews would suffer? Who gave him the idea to go that far? Who gave him [00:15:00] the right to go that far? And doing so endangered the lives of all the Jews in the empire.

Well, the answer, of course, is Haman wanted to impose idolatry to his subjects and by being a kind of god. Only gods want people to bow before them. And idolatry, as we know, is one of the three sins in the Jewish tradition. One may not transgress even if it means to pay with one's life. On a different level, therefore, Mordechai interpreted idolatry as an assault on



Jewish honor. And therefore he felt he had to risk his own life to preserve it. But what about the community of Israel, the fate of his entire people? One hypothesis is that Mordechai didn't anticipate Haman's hatred. [00:16:00]

Now really, was he that naïve? Is it that he couldn't imagine that such a catastrophe could occur in a civilized land with a renowned tradition of culture, simply because one person decides to be authentically who he is, a human being, a sovereign human being who doesn't bow before anyone? Well, let's return again to the sources. Jewish tradition generally opposes vengeance. Maimonides, the great philosopher, believes, I quote him, "If you seek vengeance, you should know what you will find: hatred and a deranged mind, sleeplessness and a wounded soul, and devouring jealousy and irrevocable remorse." [00:17:00] Which means don't seek vengeance.

Centuries later another philosopher of a different level, Moses Mendelssohn wrote, "Vengeance seeks an object, and if the vengeance fails to find one, it turns against itself." Which means there is no reason even to try it. After all, what is vengeance if not also a way of yielding to the logic of the enemy. Vengeance means to do to the enemy what the enemy did to others. As always, if, when you look well, you are bound to

find other opinions too in our tradition. Take Isaiah, the great prophet of eternal peace. He wrote, He, the Lord, has sent me to bind up the [00:18:00] broken hearted, to declare liberty to the captives, and to free the prisoners, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord and the day of vengeance of God.

Isaiah should speak of vengeance? Much before him King David, the shepherd, the great singer of God's sons, wrote, Let the saints be joyful in glory. Let them sing aloud in their beds. Let the high praises of God be in their mouth and the two-edged sword in their hand to execute vengeance upon the heathen and punishment upon the people to bind their kings with chains and their nobles with rounds of iron.

What does it mean? It means that in Jewish tradition, like everything else, we always are ambivalent. We are not [00:19:00] absolutely convinced that only one way is the right way because there are exceptions, and it's up to us to choose which option is the one that brings honor to our humanity and to our past. So let's recall, when we speak of the Kristallnacht, to the general context. Politically and militarily the Third Reich is getting stronger in its resolve and more arrogant in its ambitions. Racism dominant, anti-Semitism has become the

official state policy, both in its propaganda and its national goals.

Having obtained what it considered international respectability with the Olympic games in 1936, diminished, diminished anti-Semitism was apparent. [00:20:00] During the months preceding and during the games nobody spoke about the Jewish question. Nobody persecuted the Jews because Hitler decided to please the world, the foreigners, okay. And so, later on, the moment they ended, ancestral and racist hatred against Jews was revived and broadened. Deprived of their civil and human rights, Jews could not expect official protection from any quarter. Physicians, functionaries, engineers, architects, and lawyers were excluded from all government positions.

Strange, we must remember it. When famous or not so famous, simple Jewish professors from all the universities in Germany were dismissed, thrown out, not a single [00:21:00] professor voiced protest. And that was true about physicians and lawyers and others. It's quite simple. Separated from the general community, all Jews were condemned to dwell in a kind of invisible ghettos. In Munich, Dortmund, and Nuremberg synagogues were appropriated, expropriated. Here and there

Jewish notables and dignitaries were forced to tear out the grass with the teeth.

Faced with such brutality, where could Jews turn for help to the police? The police was the enemy. And so Jewish communities in Germany, among the oldest in Europe, lived in fear of the unknown. What to do in order to disarm the danger? To whom to appeal for help? Naturally, common sense advised [00:22:00] departure or at least preparation to leave everything behind and go elsewhere, anywhere. But that wasn't easy. Neither psychologically nor practically, since all borders were closed. America had a quota, and Palestine was under the rigorous British mandate.

No country was eager to welcome refugees, and surely not Jewish refugees. So the choice was between being helpless at home and stateless abroad. Already then when world leaders felt the need to do something they initiated conferences, so did President Roosevelt. Understandably moved by what would become a tragedy of unprecedented proportions of [00:23:00] massive immigration, he decided to organize an international gathering of [inaudible] refugees, and they chose Evian in France as the site for the event. Thirty-two nations participated in it. The sessions lasted from July 6 to July 15.

Filled with speeches and more speeches, in truth, the whole endeavor was a depressing farce, a historical joke. Rather than look for havens for uprooted persons, they were abandoned to their fate. Every national representative took the floor to invoke a variety of excuses explaining not how they will receive refugees, but why their countries could not and would not accept them. [00:24:00] NGO representatives, Zionists, and refugees were also present. The delegate of the World Jewish Congress got five minutes. The delegate of German-Jewish communities none.

The international press reported correctly on the event. The *New York Herald Tribune* ran an article under the headline "Exile Jews Refused By All in Evian." In Germany Goebbels' publications jubilated. Listen to a gigantic headline in the journal *Reichswald*, "Jews Offered at a Low Price, Any Buyer?" As for the *Danziger Vorposten*, it simply declared that the Evian conference justified Germany's policy to the Jews. Why?

[00:25:00] Listen to their logic. The best and friendliest countries in the world, with very rare exceptions, close their gates and their hearts to the plight of German Jews. So why should Germany be nicer?

The sacred principle of immigration quotas had to be observed everywhere. In the struggle between compassion and the selfish laws, compassion lost. Neutral Switzerland, the homeland of the Red Cross, went a bit farther than others. It sent its national police chief, Dr. Heinrich Rothmund, to Berlin with an infamous proposal, to stamp all Jewish documents, passports, and IDs with the letter J for *Jude*, Jew. Thus, [00:26:00] it would be easier for Switzerland, and subsequently and other governments, to know whom to accept or rather whom not to accept. Soon after, and here we come to Herschel Grynszpan's story, a new tragedy struck Polish Jews residing in Germany.

Until then, as foreign citizens, their situation was much better than that of their local brothers and sisters. German anti-Semitic laws did not apply to them. They were foreigners. And Berlin preferred not to stir up troubles on the international scene by harming foreign nationals, be they Jews. The Third Reich had prosperous commercial relations with many countries. Why endanger them? I remember Abraham Joshua Heschel, my late friend, telling me about the frustration and pain [00:27:00] he had felt being better off thanks to his Polish passport than many Jews in Frankfurt, where he taught at the Jewish Institute for Higher Learning, he was better off.

But all that changed when Warsaw, for reasons unknown, unprovoked, chose to revoke the citizenship of all its Jewish citizens who lived more than five years outside Poland. A special visa then was required and imposed on them. And all met with categorical refusal. They couldn't obtain the special visa, so they became overnight, 15,000 Polish Jews, men, women, and children, became stateless, and therefore utterly and totally unprotected. On October 28, 1938 [00:28:00] all were expelled from the Third Reich to Poland, which refused to accept them on the grounds that they were no longer citizens. They were foreigners.

Several trains had brought them to Poland's borders. One of them disembarked its human cargo at a station named Zbaszyn. The family Grynszpan was among the exiled. Here are excerpts of a letter Herschel Grynszpan, the young adolescent in Paris, received a few days later from his older sister Berta. "Dear Herschel," she writes. "You must have heard about the disaster. I shall tell you what has happened. On Thursday evening rumors were circulating [00:29:00] that Polish Jews in our city were being expelled. None of us believed it. At 9 o'clock that evening a policeman came to our house to tell us to report to the police station with our passports.

"We all trooped off as we were to the police station. Practically the whole neighborhood was already there. Almost immediately we were taken to the town hall in a police car. So was everyone else. No one told us what was up, but we realized that it was going to be the end. They shoved an expulsion order into our hands saying we had to leave Germany before October 29. We were not allowed to go home. I pleaded to be allowed to fetch a few things, and a policeman accompanied me. I packed a case with the most important clothes, but that was all we could salvage. We haven't a penny. [00:30:00] Could you send us something at large? Love from us all."

For days later in Paris her brother Herschel Grynszpan entered a shop for weapons and purchased a gun. He went to the German embassy, Rue de Lille, spoke to a secretary, a certain Monsieur Nagorka, who asked him what he wanted. Herschel refused to answer simply because the man's position wasn't high enough. He wanted to speak to the ambassador himself or at least one of his principal aides. For, he said, he had an important document to show him. After a lengthy discussion he was introduced into the office of the third secretary Herr Ernst vom Rath.

The German diplomat wanted to [00:31:00] see the document young Herschel was supposed to possess. The young Jew's response?



From his pocket he drew a revolver and shouted, "In the name of 12,000 persecuted Jews, here is the document." And he fired five bullets into the German diplomat, who collapsed. With his last strength, vom Rath howled for help. Herschel could have escaped but did not. He waited. Minutes later, while the wounded diplomat was taken to the hospital, his attacker was arrested by the French policeman Francois Autret on duty outside the embassy. He brought him to the police station.

He denied nothing. Yes, he said, I fired five bullets on a man who was alone in his office. I did so to avenge my parents, who are Jews, and other oppressed [00:32:00] people who are unhappy in Germany. Interrogations followed one another. At a certain time, a certain moment, a German official, which was unusable, was present at this police interrogation and even took part in it. He also wanted to know the real motive. Why did you do that? And Herschel simply said again, to avenge those who are persecuted by Germans. And the German diplomat said, why did you feel charged with such a mission? And he said, because I am Jewish. I share the religious faith as those who suffer as Jews.

Actually, the police found in his pocket a postcard addressed to his parents' still in Zbaszyn at the [00:33:00] border between

Poland and Germany. "My dear parents," he wrote. "I couldn't act differently. May God forgive me. My heart bleeds when I hear of the tragedy of 12,000 Jews. I must protest so the entire world hears my outcry. Please forgive me. Herschel."

Later he will say, after all, they want me to believe that to be Jewish is a crime? We are not dogs. The Jewish people has also the right to live. In the meantime, his victim, Ernst vom Rath lay in deep coma for two days. We shall come back to him.

Again I go back to the sources. Here is a man who chose as a Jew to become an avenger. What did he think? [00:34:00] What reference did he use? What voice did he hear when he made such a decision? Whatever the philosophical and/or psychological repercussions Herschel Grynszpan action may have been in himself as an individual, we must again go back to the sources. Because the past is in the present. Whatever happened 4,000 years ago at Sinai affects us today. Whatever happened at the Akedah has a reverberation in our lives today. And so therefore, we must feel, try to feel what he felt as a Jew.

What role did or does vengeance play in Jewish mentality, the Jewish psyche, and in Jewish history? [00:35:00] Is it really part of our Jewish tradition? Look, we know in the Bible there

were acts of vengeance. The first one we remember the act of vengeance, Jacob had 11 sons and 1 daughter. The daughter was very beautiful, Dinah. She is known to have been beautiful, so much so that the young prince of Nablus, the son of Hamor, fell in love with her, desperately in love, but she ignored his advances, so he used violence and raped her. His father was embarrassed.

His father, therefore, went to Jacob not only apologizing but to do what he thought to be the honorable thing. He said look, my son will marry her, intermarriage. And he even said, look, the two [00:36:00] families and their friends will live happily ever after in this land. But the answer was no. Jacob's sons couldn't forget the outrage done to their sister, and they used a strategy, a bloody strategy. They said to the prince, Father, look it's very simple, our sister will marry the prince under one condition. Let him become Jewish. And then they said, it's not enough. If you want our families to join together, all of you should become Jewish and get circumcised. (laughter)

And because of the prince, who loved Dinah so much, they all accepted circumcision. And then something terrible happened. Two sons, Shimon and Levi, used the fact that [00:37:00] the male, all the males were in pain, and they attacked them and

killed them. Jacob, when he heard that, was angry. He said, let my soul -- it's in the Bible -- not come into their secret. Into their assembly let my honor not be united, for in the wrath they slew people, men, males, and in their self they dug down a wall. Cursed be their anger, for it was fierce; and their wrath, for it was cruel.

He cursed his two sons because they became avengers. Was he too harsh? Was he right? Were the two brothers totally wrong?

[00:38:00] Sure, they weren't innocent. Had the prince and his father come to Jacob before the rape of Dinah they would have no excuse. But a deal was offered after the outrage. Though excessive, the brothers, what they did was terrible, but they had an excuse, which is not maybe accepted. Jacob didn't accept it, attenuating circumstance. They were outraged. One thing is clear, therefore, even vengeance is in the Bible, but it's discarded. It's condemned.

Now, cruelty and violence are not absent from biblical history. We are told that God *Kel kano v'nokeim*, God is jealous and vengeful. We say *Kel n'kamot haShem*. [00:39:00] What does it mean? We believe, we say, that only God should be vengeful, not human beings. It's true, in the Bible there is one case, which is disturbing, the case of the Amalekites. The Amalekites were

the first tribe to attack the Hebrews or the Israelites when they left Egypt, when they were still very weak. And therefore, when the Amalekites attacked them there was a risk. There was a danger that the Jewish people would disappear, hence Jews were then ordered, commanded by God, to kill the last Amalekite on earth.

However, our Talmudic sages corrected the biblical harshness, and they said at a certain time all the tribes in the world [00:40:00] united and were exiled and became so confused there will never, never be a possibility for anyone of us to say he is an Amalekite, Amalekites, even if they are here, will never be recognized, identified as Amalekites because it would be useless avengers. Well, there were also other avengers, Pinchas, the high priest, Elijah the prophet, but they were exceptions. Was Herschel Grynszpan in Paris, the young Polish Jew, an avenger, the first political avenger? No.

Two years earlier the leader of the Swiss fascist party, a certain Wilhelm Gustloff, he was assassinated [00:41:00] by a young Jew, David Frankfurter, in '36 in Davos, the place which became known by Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* novel and now the World Economic Forum Conference. Even earlier in 1926 a young Russian born Jew called Sholem Schwarzbard, a future poet and

militant, stopped in the streets of Paris, an immigrant from the Ukraine, and he was the former Ukrainian president and warlord during and after the Soviet revolution. And he was known to be a vicious, cruel, anti-Semitic warlord with pogroms all over, done by his henchmen.

And Sholem stopped him and said, are you Simon Petlura?

[00:42:00] The man answered, yes. So Sholem pulled out a gun and killed him. And again, that was in '26. He didn't run away. He waited for the police to arrest him. And that morning he had mailed a letter to the celebrated lawyer in Paris Henri Torres in which he told him of his decision to avenge the death of thousands of Jews in the Ukraine. And he asked him beforehand to be his defense attorney. It was a strange tale of an even stranger life. This young man was born in Bessarabia in 1886, active in the revolutionary movement, he fled to Paris and worked as a watchmaker.

During World War I he joined the Foreign Legion. His bravery won him the prestigious War Cross. He returned with French troops to Odessa in 1917 where he collected facts and memories and [00:43:00] memorabilia of Petlura's troops and their blood chilling atrocities against thousands upon thousands of Jews. The case stirred the interests and passions among Jews and

gentiles both in France and in the United States. Everywhere writers and humanists signed petitions in Sholem's favor, and ultimately it was the attorney Henri Torres who succeeded in transforming the trial not of the Jewish avenger but of the pogroms that influenced his action.

Now, Sholem Schwarzbard was declared by the jury not guilty. AS a free man he traveled all over the world fighting then against anti-Semitism and for human rights. He died shortly before Herschel Grynszpan, to save Jewish honor, [00:44:00] pulled the trigger. Now, are we to consider the two executions comparable? No. Petlura was personally guilty of mass murder. The German diplomat was not. The German diplomat was chosen by Herschel as a symbol of and for German tormenters, torturers, and murders who acted on behalf of Hitler, but he himself had never killed anyone. He was not a member of the SS. In fact, rumors had it that he was an opponent of the Nazi party.

But the regime, on its highest level, decided to use the episode to punish all the Jews in Germany. And in hindsight, Hershel Grynszpan's attitude perhaps could be understood. The suffering of others compels us to respond. The [00:45:00] response may take on various forms, but compassion for the victims is an integral part of it. Again, I do not say that he did the right

thing. I simply try to understand but not to justify. When other people suffer, I must intervene, whoever they are. When people suffer one may turn towards God and plead for his help. One can also be so concerned with them and their plight that one could forget the perpetrators, but ultimately in certain cases the question is, may one choose violence as a response to violence?

During the darkest hour of our history, in some ghettos and camps, Jews chose prayer and acceptance. It's simple. They were too weak [00:46:00] to take up arms, which anyway they did not possess. But then, there were uprisings. The postwar accusations that Jews went like sheep to slaughter instead of fighting were misplaced and erroneous. There were Jewish groups that resisted everywhere, even in Treblinka, even in Birkenau. Strange as it may sound, the first civil insurrection against what was then the mightiest army in the world, took place in the Warsaw ghetto one year before Warsaw rose up in arms.

Chronicles of that time tell us that when the ghetto fighters killed the first SS man they danced around their bodies. The reason: they just got proof that the enemy was also mortal. But vengeance? When the liberators entered prisons [00:47:00] and death camps they found inscriptions on the walls in Yiddish.



"Brothers, remember, *nekome* ," which means, brothers, remember, avenge us. But there was no real vengeance. Why? We shall come back to it in a few moments.

Let us return to the cold day of November 7, 1938 in Paris. For the moment, Herschel is in jail, and from vom Rath comatose. He lies in the hospital. The French response is diplomatic. The government publishes a communique expressing its regrets about the attack on a foreign envoy on French soil. As for Germany, the official reaction is bombastic. In form, Hitler sent to Paris his personal physician, Dr. Karl Brandt, accompanied by renowned specialist from Munich, Professor Georg [00:48:00] Magnus. They tried their best, helped by local specialists, but vom Rath dies in the afternoon of the 9<sup>th</sup>, November 9.

An official car takes the body to the frontier at Aix-la-Chapelle where a special train has been waiting to take him to Dusseldorf, a national funeral attended by Hitler himself, von Ribbentrop, and Rudolf Hess and the highest officials in the land was being held. Flowers, eulogy, speeches, a military orchestra playing Beethoven's funeral march. And Joseph Goebbels in Berlin was preparing his own response to what the German -- Germany called the Jewish conspiracy against the Third Reich. Goebbels planned it in every detail, who should do what

and where, [00:49:00] and to whom. And it will be remembered as Kristall Night.

It was a huge state sponsored and organized pogrom. During that night in Stuttgart a 29-year-old teacher Felix David committed suicide. Ruth his young wife committed suicide. Their two babies Benjamin and Gideon were found dead next to their parents. Was it fear, disgust, protest? Was it their way of saying goodnight to Hitler's Germany and to the whole world too? Everywhere the Nazi tormentors tried to show their inventiveness, their fantasy in torturing their Jewish victims. In Baden-Baden, for instance, all the Jews were marched to the synagogue behind the Star of David saying, God, do not abandon us.

In one city Jews [00:50:00] were all led to the synagogue where they were ordered to sing the repulsive Nazi song, the "Horst-Wessel-Lied." A prominent Jew had to ascend the bimah and read aloud a passage from *Mein Kampf* instead of reading the Torah. Why such hatred towards Jews? Why such nastiness towards whatever Jews considered sacred? Why the synagogues? Why the holy scrolls? What is it in them that inspires such fear in the killers? From eyewitnesses we heard that the general population

support the pogrom, or at least did not oppose it. How many doors were opened for hunted down Jews?

How many families chose to offer shelter to Jewish children?

How many men and women rushed to the burning synagogues to save holy scrolls? There were some good, courageous clergymen who spoke up in [00:51:00] anger. And we must remember all of them with gratitude, for there were not many, just a handful. Eight hundred fifteen Jewish stores were destroyed and pillaged in every major city in Germany. It was the worst national pogrom in history. Two hundred seventy-five synagogues were set aflame that night. A much higher figure has also been retained. More than 100 Jews were slain. Some 30,000 were sent to Dachau, Buchenwald, and Sachsenhausen.

When the pogrom was over a high-level conference headed by Hermann Goring and Goebbels were held. On the agenda, Krystall Night. Question. Its organizers have thought and foreseen every aspect of the pogrom except one. In destroying and looting so many Jewish business and buildings, they forgot that [00:52:00] most of them carried insurance from foreign insurance agencies. And therefore, Germany might be forced to pay them in much needed foreign currency. Wouldn't it mean then that the Jews lost too little? For three hours Germany's leaders

discussed money. Don't worry, said Goring, and his solution? He will publish a decree canceling the insurance contracts.

But who will pay for the mountains of the broken glass? Not to worry, replied Goring, the damage done to the Jews will be covered by themselves. And a billion marks was imposed, or imposed on the German community to pay for what was done by the Germans to them. Then the discussion turned to a different direction. What should be done [00:53:00] so the Jewish passengers wouldn't disturb aliens in the train? It's simple, suggested someone, the Jews will be given one wagon for themselves. What? exclaimed another. Suppose the train will be full and the Jewish wagon will be half empty, why should they be more comfortable than the German passengers? Okay, laughed someone, we'll put them in the toilets.

Remember, the Wehrmacht had decided to occupy Czechoslovakia and prepared itself to war with Poland and later with France and Great Britain. And there in Goring's office all high-ranking officials were concerned with Jewish train travel. Later Jews would be made to pay for their one-way ticket to Auschwitz. We desire only one thing, Goebbels' wrote in his *Völkischer Beobachter*, [00:54:00] that the world became sufficiently Philo-Semitic so as to help us get rid of all the Jews. This regard

the irony and just think of its implication. Let's not forget, in those early time Hitler's goal was not yet the final solution but evacuation.

What that would become, actually, Adolf Eichmann's first major task, to find ways, legal ways of not to help Jew immigrate, escape from Germany. But too many governments were afraid of being compelled to welcome Jewish refugees. Scandinavian countries invoked their neutrality. In London, Prime Minister Chamberlain continued to preach *rapprochement* with Berlin. Even considering to offer Britain's colonies to the Third Reich, appeasement was the name of his political philosophy.

[00:55:00] However, public opinion was against him.

In an open letter to the *Times* the archbishop of Canterbury protested against the horrors of *Kristall* Night. Whatever could have been the provocation, whether deplorable action of a young, responsible Jew said he, one cannot justify such ferocious reprisals on such a scale. In France, reactionary papers led by Charles Maurras urged the government not to open the frontiers even larger. There were enough Jews already in the country, he said. America recalled its ambassador.

What about Herschel Grynszpan in all this? In jail he was awaiting his trial. His statement to the investigating judge was, I was not motivated by hatred or by vengeance but simply by love for my father and my people who have endured unbearable [00:56:00] suffering. I deeply regret having injured anyone, but I had no other way of expressing myself. He was indicted for premeditated murder and was defended by Moro-Giafferi, who with Henri Torres had defended Sholem Schwarzbard and later David Frankfurter. Thanks to the worldwide media, particularly in America inspired by a highly respected Journalist Dorothy Thompson, Herschel Grynszpan's deed was discussed everywhere with sympathy.

The defense planned to bring Herschel's family to the witness stand. Count appointed psychiatrist concluded he was sane and responsible for his actions. People everywhere were awaiting his trial with curiosity and anxiety. Weeks and months came and went, and no trial date had been set. Vom Rath's father came to Paris and was interrogated by examining magistrates, and still [00:57:00] no date for the trial could be found. The more Germany pressed for it the less success it obtained. At one point just before the outbreak of World War II, chances for opening of the trial increased, but then Germany asked for postponing sine die.

When the Wehrmacht entered Paris the Gestapo's first priority was to seize Herschel Grynszpan, but he wasn't there. First, he was transferred to one prison, then to another. Then the French prison authorities didn't know what to do with him, so they let him go free. And he strangely was afraid of freedom. He was looking for a prison. He continued his wanderings until he reached in Toulouse a prison where he was finally accepted. (laughter) It is there that the Gestapo, following a long search, [00:58:00] found him. The Pétain government didn't wait long to hand him over to the German occupant.

The prison was immediately transferred to the Gestapo headquarters in Berlin. He stayed there until January '41 when he was transferred to Sachsenhausen. In the meantime, Goebbels thought of staging a spectacular show trial proving of what world Jewry is capable of. But then all of a sudden he gave up the idea. No one knows the real reason for that bizarre decision. Was it because the German law forbade trying a stateless person for committing crimes outside of Germany? They found ways to overcome that obstacle. Another hypothesis, what Goebbels had planned, to summon French statesmen as witnesses for the prosecution and failed to obtain their consent.

Still another theory maintains that Herschel was planning to plead. His crime was not [00:59:00] political but sentimental. Namely, that he had maintained a homosexual relationship with a German diplomat. (laughter) It was rumored that Goebbels thought that such relationship could damage German's reputation. And therefore, there was no trial. And then his trace disappeared. We don't know what happened. Was he murdered? Where? Sachsenhausen? Some people say so. Was he beheaded in the Moabit prison? Who knows? But we know a sequel to his death and its consequences. Six months after *Kristall* Night another event shook up world conscience.

The voyage of what was called a ship of the damned, *St. Louis*. [01:00:00] Nearly a thousand Jewish refugees left Germany in the spring of 1939 aboard a German boat, *St. Louis*. Their destination Cuba. They had visas which were revoked. The rest is known. Cuba refused to let them disembark. The ship came to Florida's shores and was sent back to Germany. Again, listen. Six months after the atrocities of *Kristall* Night a thousand Jews, men, women, and children were sent back from American shores to Hitler's Germany. Of course, more about that we shall talk another time.



But just in conclusion, how come that in 1945 when the war ended [01:01:00] with so many wounded, burning memories, how come that the young people in the forests, from the partisans, from the ghettos did not become avengers? Germany was afraid of them. We know it from the documents. They were convinced that the Jews will -- those who survive will come back and do terrible things to Germans. They didn't. Is it that simply we are not a people of vengeance? We are a people of memory. And therefore, when we speak of the past and its horrors it is not because we favor an attitude of morbidity. We are not a morbid people. We don't want any people to become morbid. What I really believe, that if [01:02:00] we speak of the past it is we don't want our past to become someone else's future. Thank you. (applause)

END OF VIDEO FILE