



Night of the Broken Glass (Reichskristallnacht)

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Autobiographical reflections on the night of November 9, 1938, and beyond.

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By Fritz Voll

The night of November 9, 1938, left a deep impression in my memory. I was eight years old, and it was the first time that I saw a house fire. It was also the first time that I consciously felt a discrepancy between a comforting and positive Nazi propaganda we heard and read every day and a very nasty reality, a reality of death and destruction that would unfold quite openly.

That night we woke up to loud noises on our narrow one-way street, the Georg-Buchholz-Strasse in Arnswalde, Germany, and saw the synagogue diagonally opposite our house in flames. We had actually never noticed that the building was a synagogue, though we went at least three times per week to the church assembly hall right opposite the synagogue. Perhaps the adults knew, but they certainly did not speak about it to us children. Did the synagogue have to burn to be noticed as the place of Jewish worship and learning?

When we went outside we saw many people watching the fire. The building was attached to other buildings in a row of small houses. By the time the synagogue was in flames the SA-men, who had torched it, had already disappeared. However, the people on the street knew that the fire had deliberately been set. I heard how my parents and others were upset about the fact that the fire department had protected only the surrounding buildings and had allowed the fire to completely destroy the synagogue.

I also heard from my parents that the synagogue had been torched as an act of violence against the Jews. I overheard them whispering to each other that the persecution of the Jews would only be the beginning. Next in line would be the "true" Christians. My parents were Evangelicals with a Pentecostal leaning and believed that only "born-again" believers were true Christians. People in the state churches were considered to be Christians only by name. Later I heard rumors of the code word for this night of burning synagogues and many Jewish homes and businesses, "Reichskristallnacht" (in English known as Night of the Broken Glass). In this connection my parents mentioned another code word for upcoming violent actions against Christians: "Reichssternennacht" (Night of the Stars). I have never been able to ascertain, if the Nazis had really planned such an event.

Up to the torching of the synagogue I had not been aware that there were still Jews around in our

time. In Sunday School and in church we were only taught about the Jews of the so-called Old Testament and about those that were supposedly responsible for the death of Jesus and his followers.

My father had his own wheelwright (carriage maker) shop in the town of Arnswalde, Pomerania, where he built - among other things - cattle and horse trailers. After the war I asked my parents if my father had not known any Jewish customers, cattle or horse traders who needed trailers? Did my parents know a single Jew? I never got a straight forward answer. It was only in the late seventies, when my parents were in their mid-seventies that I once heard my father say regretfully: "Why did we not save a single Jewish life?"

Often after this memorable and terrible night I roamed the burned-out synagogue and leafed through the torched books with Hebrew letters. Did I ever ask at home about their meaning? Would my parents have known anything about the synagogue and its meaning for Judaism, if I had asked them? Why did we as Christian children never learn anything about the Judaism of our own time? After all, did we not every Sunday morning hear about Jews in sermons and children's stories and in Sunday School. But what kind of Jews did we hear about: Pharisees who were opposed to Jesus and whom he, in turn, confronted with harsh words, Sadducees and priests who delivered him to the Romans for crucifixion. Never a word about the fact that Jesus was and remains himself a Jew, that the risen Lord of the Church is a Jew, that he himself is supposed to have said: "Salvation comes from the Jews." (Present tense!) John 4:22.

Here I have to insert an experience of the more recent past — 1984. I was working for the Canadian Council of Christians and Jews, when I was asked to speak at the inauguration of a newly-built Orthodox synagogue. The so-called Keegstra Affair had just been in the papers every day. Mr. Keegstra, a high school teacher, had, unchallenged for fourteen years, taught his students that Jews conspire to overthrow the governments of the world and that the Holocaust was a Jewish invention. I had done my best to bring about a Christian-Jewish dialogue in our city, where we had more than a hundred Jewish survivors of the Holocaust and many who had survived the camps. The young rabbi of the Orthodox synagogue was a good friend of mine and he actively engaged in dialogues at the university and elsewhere in the city. Representatives of the government, the Mayor of the city of about 700,000 and representatives of the Jewish schools and associations were present and delivered speeches. The building was overcrowded. Not a single representative of the more than 300 Christian congregations in the city was present.

When it was my turn to speak, I related the story of the burning synagogue in Arnswalde. I described the overwhelming feelings of gratitude which I experienced at that moment: God had allowed me to witness the dedication of a new synagogue — in my subjective experience built on the ruins of the synagogue of my memory. "The Germans did not manage to conclude the "Final Solution" of the Nazis. In the face of two millennia of anti-Judaism and antisemitism in Christian countries another *shul* is being erected, a sign of Jewish chutzpah, faithfulness and hope, an invitation to Christians to finally find their older sibling. To this all of us here are witnesses," I concluded. The thundering applause that followed my short remarks left me bewildered and in a mixture of pain and joy. Pain, because a new synagogue built in a free country can never atone for one that was destroyed, and a small and struggling Jewish congregation can only be a weak reminder of Jewish communities in Europe that were brutally destroyed. But then there also was joy. The rabbi embraced me, and the continuing applause seemed to express a spirit of gratitude in the fact that nothing in this world is able to destroy what God wants and loves. In these moments I felt, for the first time in my life, that it was good to be a German, if just for the chance to deliver this little message to Jewish people who had suffered so much in the name and by the hands of Germans. When I think about the stories I have heard from Jewish survivors, I wonder how I can survive as a Christian, how can Christianity survive, if it does not repent its age-old anti-Judaism.

On the fiftieth anniversary of Kristallnacht, in November 1988, I was asked by Jewish students of

our city's university to participate in a panel discussion about the events of the Kristallnacht and to answer questions. The polite but probing questions of the younger generations of Jews can now, fifty years after the Holocaust, be answered with some historical accuracy and objective distance. But what about the underlying questions: where were the Christians of Germany? Only very few even prayed for the Jews. During all my childhood I never heard a single prayer for the Jewish people in the evangelical churches we attended. Did we not see them first on our streets with their yellow stars on their clothing, then in columns of emaciated prisoners working on railway tracks and other war-damaged projects? And when we did not see them anymore, because they were sent to their deaths in the camps, why did we not notice? Where were the "true" Christians, those "born again" ones, and all those who did not fall into the trap of the "de-judaized" so-called "German Christians"?

And where was God? Was God in Auschwitz, where Jesus was? If the early councils of the church and their creeds got it right that Jesus Christ is the God-man, the risen person with two natures, would his human nature not be Jewish? Would that mean that he not only *was* a Jew but that Christians confess the risen Christ as being a Jew at God's right hand today and only as such the representative of all humanity before God? "What you did to the least of my brothers (the Jewish people) that you did to me," Jesus is supposed to have said. But many Christians still continue to blame the Jews for having killed him. Should we not admit instead that Jesus Christ is abused in every Jew mistreated? These are questions I ponder as a lay person without receiving more than half-hearted responses from those that should know.

The evangelical congregations in which I grew up were most certainly not in any way aligned with the state as the Protestant churches were right from their beginning in the Reformation. However, in spite of their negative attitude towards the state churches they were no less anti-Judaic. Every individual had to strive to attain a personal relationship with God and to reach for his or her own salvation. But in this struggle God alone would be the victor, not the believer; and so faith became the equivalent of obedience, an obedience that was not allowed to question God or the state. When one had become a believer the struggle was over, there remained only submission to God's will, which expressed itself in grace through the church and in judgment through the state. The Lutheran teaching of the two kingdoms saw the state as the judging left hand of God, while the church was seen as the merciful right hand of God. Faith had to accept these two sides of the divine rule without questioning. For Luther an uprising of the believers against the state would have been unthinkable, even a grave sin against God. Luther turned strongly against the uprising of the peasants in 1525, though he also condemned the princes, against whom the peasants protested, as completely corrupt. Luther said, a Christian could be a hangman expressing God's judicial wrath over criminals in society and, at the same time, a loving and forgiving person in his private life (Paul Althaus: *Die Ethik Martin Luthers*). These two spheres of the world had to complement each other.

In dialogue with Jews I discovered that in Judaism faith always remained a trusting struggle with God and a questioning of the scriptures and all authority. In the biblical account of Jacob's struggle it is Jacob who emerges as the victor, not God: "You have been strong against God and against men and you have prevailed" (Genesis 32:24-32).

For more than 1900 years Christianity portrayed Judaism as legalistic and diametrically opposed to the Christian gospel. Christian theology had, since the second century, described the Jews as anti-Christian, spiritually blinded, and theologically irrelevant. Though the Nazis had their own reasons to kill the Jews, they certainly seized on the Christian image of Judaism and the Jewish people. Christians in general, and especially committed believers (that is those who had a deeper understanding of Christian teaching) were paralyzed during the Holocaust by their own theology and were not able to stand up against a murdering state.

After the war I read in Pietist, Baptist and Pentecostal magazines of the Nazi time articles written

by leaders of these movements, which exhorted the believers to be faithful to the German state and its leadership "in hard times like these." They based their exhortations on biblical references very much like the leaders of the Lutheran church did, mainly on Romans 13:1 ff., though they never went as far as the so-called "German Christians" in the glorification of Hitler and the Nazi system.

The German Pentecostal church my parents attended with us children was an outgrowth of the holiness movement from England. The following article of the Constitution of this church is a revision that was made in compliance with the Nuremberg Laws of 1936 which dealt with the euthanasia of "unworthy" life, sterilization of people with severe inherited diseases and the elimination of Jews from Germany. This revision came into effect on October 13, 1938, only 27 days before Kristallnacht. Though evangelical churches accepted the Hitler regime as divinely ordained, they are still very reluctant to admit to their culpability:

Article 7

Attitude of the Church Towards the People (Volk) and the State (Reich)

With thankfulness to God we confess that we are, according to his providence, members of the German people. The dependence on God and the mind of Jesus Christ enable us to stand with our people (Volk) with body and life, with possessions and blood. The energetic support of all public endeavors of the People's Welfare system is to us the duty of our Christian conscience.

We honor and accept the nation's leadership and government. In sincerity we promise all loyalty and every obedience, which we are indebted to render together with all Christians to our earthly authorities according to God's will and the word and spirit of our Lord, Mark 12:17; Romans 13:1-7; 1 Tim. 2:1-4; 1 Peter. 2:13-17.

We acknowledge that it is in keeping with the order of the divine Creator when the leadership of the people in wisdom and righteousness issues laws and bylaws, which are appropriate to form a dam against incurable inherited diseases and against the resulting misery, which in the past has been visible in the body of the people (Volk). Wherever our spiritual superintendents and ministers of the Word have to give information and counseling to those affected, they declare themselves wholeheartedly prepared.

In the race laws we see a divinely willed and biblically founded endeavor to purify and to keep pure the people (Volk) from mixture with alien races.

The leading-out of the Jews from the community of our people, as also from other peoples, is for us a process according to divine providence and divine will.

It would not be just to put the guilt for the persecution of the Jews and other Nazi atrocities upon the heads of individuals like my parents. However, all of us as Germans, and especially as Christians, have to bear responsibility for the things that were done in our name, without the opposition of our parents and without the objection of most committed Christians.

Personally, I live consciously and for the rest of my life in the shadow of the murder of millions of Jews. Whenever this monstrous evil comes to mind, I can't help but lament: my God, my God we have allowed your people to be murdered — more than one million children: Mein Gott, die Kinderchen, die Kinderchen...

Shall I give up believing in a loving God? Should I give up believing in Jesus, because he has been made the wall of enmity between Jews and Christians, instead of allowing it to be broken down (Eph.2:14)? Should I convert to Judaism or give up religion altogether? I have decided to remain faithful to the commitments I made early in my life to God and to Jesus as God's way for non-Jews to come to the God of Israel. This faithfulness demands repentance for false witness against Jews and Judaism and other religions, it requires intensive learning and re-thinking of Christian theology in dialogue with Jews and with other Christians. All this is not easy for a lay person without formal theological training. But then, who said that life, and especially the life of faith, should be easy!

What about the Christian church and my relationship with its tradition and life? I cannot be a Christian without being part of the universal church in one of its many local settings. I repent, re-think, learn, am in dialogue and witness as a member of the church hoping to do my part in reforming its teaching and attitude towards Judaism and the Jewish people. The official churches' leaderships are slowly changing their attitude. But it seems to take generations for most of their members to get it. May God help us to do our collective turning more quickly. This will be my prayer on November 9, when I think of the destruction of the small synagogue in Arnswalde.

This article also has been published at www.sztetl.org.pl, homepage of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews