



Kristallnacht remembered

01.11.2021 | Eve Jospe*

Sermon at Adas Israel Synagogue, Washington, DC, November 4, 1988.

I'd like to start out with two brief explanatory remarks. The first one is that the person who should address you tonight is my husband, whom Rabbi Wohlberg had originally asked to do so. But he had weighty personal reasons not to accept that invitation. And so I'm standing here as his understudy—something I have actually, and happily, been throughout the blessed years in which he has been my teacher and mentor.

The second explanation concerns the fact that I won't talk to you in general terms about the events the Kristallnacht foreshadowed. Instead, I'll try to give you a feel for the atmosphere in which we lived in the Germany of the mid-to-late thirties. Please understand that what I'm going to tell you is meant to be no more than a personal account of experiences my husband and I largely shared, as well as my own reactions to, or thoughts about, what happened an—unbelievable—half century ago.

Kristallnacht Remembered, as I've named my talk, is a subject that conjures up events and emotions which still haunt one's dreams, but are rarely permitted to surface into one's waking hours, where they would incapacitate one to deal with one's daily business. Yet I do realize that there are times and places which we, as a group, must set aside for a conscious recollection of what happened, and for a renewal of our resolve not to let what occurred *in* the past become merely another thing of the past. And this is such a time and place.

Kristallnacht Remembered—two loaded words, each carrying its own burden, each asking us to take upon us, again and again, what has been called “the risk of thinking” (Raspberry, Washington Post), of grappling for meanings that still elude our grasp of re-living experiences we'd rather forget. I should like to look with you at both words, and see what they may signify for us.

The first one, *Kristallnacht*, is, of course, a cynically chosen euphemism and grotesque misnomer. For *Kristall*, or crystal, which, by analogy to the generic name for a transparent mineral is, as you know, a designation of fine glass that has been expertly cut to refract the light into all colors of the rainbow. But what I saw in the early morning of November 10 covering the sidewalk in front of one of Berlin's best-known synagogues (Prinzregentenstrasse) near our home was not *Kristall*, was not cut glass. It was glass that cut, shards that cut into the very heart first of Germany's and then of Europe's Jewry, draining away its life-blood.

How did I come to stand in front of that synagogue? I had run there to find out whether what friends had reported to us in a frightened, and frightening, phone-call a few minutes before could possibly be true. And it was: Our synagogue appeared to be in shambles. The shock of it was such that I could not recall afterwards whether I had seen any evidence of a fire, any patrolling stormtroopers, or any pedestrians. All that registered in my mind, and has stayed there till today, was a carpet of glinting splinters. So I ran home to tell my husband, who immediately left for the Central Office of the Representative Council of Jews in Germany (*Reichsvertretung*), to inform them in person rather than call their switchboard. But they already knew, and in fact were just then attending a hastily called emergency meeting.

What is by now well-known, but was unknown to us then, is the causal connection between those bits of glass falling from the exploding windows of our burning synagogues, as well as from the shattered plate-glass fronts of most Jewish-owned stores throughout the country, and the fatal shooting, a day or two before, of a German Embassy official in Paris (Ernst vom Rath). The shooting had been done by a distraught Jewish youth (Herschel Greenspan), whose parents had just been deported by Germany to their native Poland. Or rather, they and others like them were left stranded at that country's border, because Poland refused to take back any of its Jews who had previously emigrated. In our utter bewilderment about all that had happened, we obviously *could* not understand what we were, however, soon *made* to understand, and in no uncertain terms: the destruction around us was, by Nazi logic, our—self-evidently fitting—punishment for our fellow-Jew's crime.

One day after the Kristallnacht, tens of thousands of Jewish men were arrested all over Germany, and taken to different concentration camps. One of them was my husband. I shall not go into any details about that—fortunately short—period in our lives. But I do want to recount for you some details about his arrest.

Following the soul-shaking morning I described to you, we had spent an apprehensive afternoon at home, interspersed by phone-calls from equally apprehensive relatives and friends. In the early evening, the doorbell rang. I answered it, and was faced by two men in civilian clothing. They showed me their Gestapo badges, and politely asked to see my father, evidently judging me too young to be a rabbi's wife. When my husband joined us in the hall, they told him, again politely, that they had orders to arrest him but they neither gave us, nor apparently knew of, any reason for that arrest. In an almost fatherly way, they advised him to take along some warm clothing as well as a prayerbook or Bible, presumably thinking he might have to perform some pastoral functions at whatever place he would find himself. And as they accompanied him downstairs—avoiding the elevator—they asked him in all seriousness whether he preferred to go with them to the main police station by cab (for which, however, he would have to pay), or by streetcar. He chose the cheaper vehicle.

Let me insert here a little footnote, though it interrupts the sequence of events: Some time after Alfred's return from the K.Z., he ran on the street into one of the two Gestapo officials. The man stopped him and said: "I can't tell you how sorry I was to have to arrest you." And then, quickly passing on, he wished him well.

But to come back to November 10; at the police station, all men who had been rounded up were held for some hours, again without any explanation, before being loaded into trucks that took them to the concentration camp of *Sachsenhausen*, near Berlin. In contrast to later developments, it was at that time still possible to obtain a release, if one could submit to the camp's *Kommandant* a valid certification that some country had granted one an entrance permit or visa, which meant that one would be able to emigrate soon. That release was, however, conditional. It was accompanied by an ultimatum in the form of a deadline set for an often impossibly early departure. If that deadline was not met (and for technical or bureaucratic reasons it frequently could not be), re-arrest would follow; a truly dreadful possibility.

In that dire emergency, Chief Rabbi Hertz of Great Britain, who had been informed of that situation, came to the rescue of a few young rabbis by providing them and their immediate families with permits to enter England. And it was our great good fortune that Alfred was one of them. Now we were able to leave with our infant daughter, grateful beyond description that we could escape, and hurting beyond description with the pain of knowing that most of the goodbyes we had had to say would be final. We went first to London, and after a few months there made our way to the U.S., welcomed by Alfred's brother and his wife.

What I've told you so far happened, as you know, in the late thirties. And that brings me to a

question invariably asked of German Jews who emigrated only around that time: “Why didn’t you leave sooner? Didn’t you see the writing on the wall?” The answer is—as happens so often—more complicated than the question. It depends as much on objective facts—namely the external circumstances in which those you ask of found themselves at that time—as on their inner disposition, that is, on psychological factors.

To some—to take those factors first—it was simply unthinkable to sever all family ties, to leave parents behind, to let children go. (In parenthesis, though, it should be mentioned here that many parents did have the immense fortitude to send their teens or even pre-teens away, entrusting them to organizations that would take them to the safety of other countries, but not knowing whether they would ever be reunited again. And all too many were not.)

To others, the very idea of emigration was inconceivable. They could not bear the thought of pulling up their roots, roots their families had for generations sunk deep down, and to exchange their familiar surroundings with the alien world beyond. Still others were kept from making any efforts to leave until it was too late by a combination of political innocence and an abiding, if naive, hope. Despite an ever increasing number of anti-Semitic laws, they continued to feel that things would, somehow, take a turn for the better. They had seen the Weimar Republic come and go—go, that is, due to what they perceived to be its foolish shenanigans. Subsequently, and misjudging the true character of Hitler’s regime, they hoped naively that it, too, would be overthrown soon.

Another group, men and women who had been educated in the humanist tradition, entertained a different kind of hope; it was based on their conviction that the preachments of National Socialism were merely a temporary aberration, running counter to Germany’s true ethos, which they found exemplified in the classical works of its poets and thinkers. Putting their faith in the spirit of a nation they believed to represent the epitome of civilization, they disregarded all historical manifestations of an anti-Semitism indigenous to that same nation; they thought they could outlast their beloved country’s sudden descent into irrationality, and wait for its inevitable return to reason.

And then there was a small number of singularly selfless Jews who felt that by staying on, they could do whatever good still could be done for their community in its rapidly progressing dissolution. The brunt of this dissolution, however, was borne by those thousands who had indeed, and often quite early, seen the writing on the wall, and had searched in ever growing desperation for some spot on earth that would offer them a place of refuge. But they found no country that would admit them; and so they were trapped.

It is all of these—those who, for whatever reason, chose to stay too long, and those who, cruelly, simply never had a chance to escape the Nazi net that was soon spread across Europe—it is all of those we remember on this anniversary of the Kristallnacht. But what does it really mean, to remember? The word has widely divergent connotations, ranging from the sentimentally nostalgic to the factual or even trivial, from the heart-warming to the heart-wrenching, with many shades in between. More than that; to remember—whether it be done individually or collectively—can, as all of us have experienced at some time or another, be constructive or destructive, therapeutic or traumatic, a blessing or a curse.

Collectively, we are past masters of remembering. We were schooled in this art from antiquity on by numerous biblical injunctions, some expressed positively, for instance in the commandment to “Remember the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy” (Ex. 20:8), some negatively, for instance, in the exhortation to “Remember Amalek,” underscored by the added words “Do not forget” (Ex. 17: 8-16; Deut. 25:17-19). But regardless of what it is we are called upon to remember, our remembrances as such have played so pivotal a role in shaping our religious consciousness that Prof. Solomon Schechter used to say we are “praying our history,” meaning that the continual recollection of our people’s past has become a constitutive component of our liturgy and rituals.

Yet our history-praying, and our remembering Amalek—Israel’s prototypical, and perennially re-appearing, arch-enemy—represent, it seems to me, two entirely different types of remembrance. The one is an ever repeated thanksgiving for past deliverances, and/or a reverent rehearsing of past events. The other is—or so some commentators tell us—an explicit warning against all threats to our survival, and to that of the values we believe in. But this explicit warning carries, I feel, also an implicit message, the message I hear resonating in the two small words: “Never again.” I’m sure all of us sympathize almost viscerally with these two words. But I am less sure about their real intent: Are they meant to be a categorical imperative, a battle cry, a prayer—or all of these combined?

Whatever the biblical terms *Zachor*, “remember,” and *Lo Tishkach*, “do not forget,” may mean in the context in which they appear, they must have another, and quite special, significance for us at this hour of introspection, when our thoughts should be turned exclusively inward, when many of us are saying a very personal *Yizkor*. The Amalek we knew has caused us irretrievable losses. As a community, we have been horribly dismembered. We can neither be made whole again, nor can we be consoled.

In hours such as this one, some of us who remember those of the 6 million we knew personally, can “see” them again, if only with our inner eye, can see and hear them as they once were. And by this mental recall, by our restoring to them a semblance of their personalities, we can save them for some fleeting moments from the oblivion of the mass grave. But how can we “remember” all those we never knew? Though the number “6 million” is seared into our memory, it is such an unimaginable figure that it must remain an abstraction for us. We don’t know many specifics about the men, women and children that gruesome “6 million” comprises. We cannot recognize any of the concrete features that distinguished one individual from the other. Unable to form an image of what they looked like in our minds, we can, strictly speaking, not truly remember them.

Yet it is incumbent upon us to do so, for they have no one else to say *Kaddish* for them. How, then, *can* we remember our anonymous dead? In the way Jews have always remembered their dead, known or unknown; By affirming, *Yahrzeit* after *Yahrzeit*, our abiding sense of kinship with them. By telling ourselves, again and again that we are inextricably bound to them, so much so that *by our identification with them, we define our own identity*. And through this ever renewed conscious identification with those we lost, we may be able to approximate—just barely approximate—the meaning of the expression *Mechaye Hametim*, the calling our dead back to life. Or to put it less presumptuously: By remembering them, we can assure them at least of that place in our hearts and minds that will make them live—live on in us—as long as we do. We can do no more. But we cannot, and we must not, do less.

{newsItem.description->f.format.html()}