



From the Night of the Pogrom to the Final Solution: Experiences and Lessons

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The former Secretary General of the World Jewish Congress gives a personal account of the developing Nazi terror against the Jews and of his role in warning the Allied powers about plans for the annihilation of European Jewry.

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Experiences and Lessons

Gerhart M. Riegner

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are gathered here this evening to remind ourselves what happened fifty years ago on the night of the 9/10 November 1938 in Germany and how the path from the Night of the Pogrom led to the Final Solution. We are gathered here to pay homage before the victims and to learn a lesson for the future.

What happened on this night?

Let me list the cold facts, as they emerge from official Nazi documents.¹

- Around 30, 000 Jews were arrested and chiefly carried off to the concentration camps of Buchenwald, Dachau and Sachsenhausen
- 91 Jews were murdered and several hundred died after committal to the camps
- 267 synagogues were burnt down or destroyed
- 7,500 businesses were destroyed or pillaged
- almost all Jewish cemeteries were vandalized
- 177 residential buildings were burnt
- material damage amounting to several hundred million RM was caused
- tens of thousands of window panes were smashed and the resultant damage alone amounted to 6 million marks
- a tax of 1 billion RM was imposed on German Jewry as a penalty and insurance claims were confiscated by the Reich.

These are the crude figures of what happened that night and the following day.

What caused these horrific events?

These events are without precedent even in the history of National Socialism.

According to the Polish law of expatriation of March 1938, all Polish citizens who had lived more than five years abroad could be deprived of their citizenship. In October 1938 Polish Jews in many parts of Germany were summoned to the Polish consulate for passport inspection and those to whom this law applied were banned from future entry to Poland. Consequently, at the end of October, when the Gestapo expelled tens of thousands of such Polish Jews and transported them by lorry to the Polish border, the Poles refused them entry. A major scandal ensued: thousands of Polish Jews languished, starving and freezing in the open for days on end at the border. Amongst them was a family by the name of Grynspan, who for 27 years, since 1911, had been residents in Hanover. Eventually, the authorities gave way and in the end most were let into Poland. The daughter of the Grynspan family, Berta, wrote a postcard to her brother Herschel in Paris, in which she described the horrific events. Thereupon, the brother – a boy of 17 – decided as a gesture of protest to go to the German Embassy in Paris and shoot a member of the Embassy. Indeed, on 9 November he shot Vom Rath, a minor official in his office at the Parisian embassy.

On the evening of 9 November, the leaders of the Nazi Party assembled for a veterans' reunion in the Old Town Hall in Munich. Goebbels reported anti-Jewish rioting and burning of synagogues in Hessen and Anhalt as a reaction to the assassination. He recounted that the Führer, upon his report, had decided that riots were not to be instigated by the Party; *'as far as they develop spontaneously, they are not to be opposed'*. Everybody understood: the Party should not appear to the outside to be the instigator, however, in reality it must organize and execute everything. And that is how it happened.²

That is then how the spontaneous actions appeared: on 9 November, Heydrich, Chief of Security Police, sent an express telegram to all police posts. I quote: 'Due to the assassination of Counsellor Vom Rath in Paris, *demonstrations against the Jews throughout the Reich* are to be expected during the course of tonight, 9/10 November 1938', and he gave instructions for what was to happen.³ Heinrich Müller, Chief of the Gestapo telegraphed on 9 November all police stations: 'Very soon there are to take place in all of Germany actions against the Jews, in particular, their synagogues. *They are not to be disturbed.*'⁴ Finally, let me quote a telephone conversation between an SA *Standarte* in Wesermünde and an SA Sturmhauptführer in Lesum:

A: *Have you already received your orders?*

B: *No.*

A: *Red Alert of the SA throughout Germany. Retaliatory measures for the death of Vom Rath. When evening comes, there are to be no more Jews in Germany. Jewish businesses are to be destroyed too.*

B: *What is actually to happen to the Jews?*

A: *Annihilation.*⁵

Annihilation

Here we hear the word for the first time. The ordinary man at the SA *Standarte* had understood.

What took place in these days in Germany was a signal. From this it was clear where the path led. The world was shocked and horrified but did not react. At that time I was in my office of the Geneva Bureau of the World Jewish Congress and I published a news bulletin in French about the pogrom on six full folio pages.

I said that the Night of the Pogrom was a signal. But it was not the beginning.

The beginning could be read in *Mein Kampf* according to which Judah was the global pestilence, where it is written that the Jew may well belong to a race but not to humanity and that the Jew was the mirror image of the devil. The beginning could be read in the Party programme, in which judeophobia became the central theme, in which the Jewish people became the scapegoat for all evil in the world - responsible for Communism, Socialism and Liberalism, for all poverty and wealth - and in which the destruction of the Jews became the principal goal.

The beginning - that was the Day of Boycott on 1 April 1933 on which in front of every Jewish business/shop, of every Jewish doctor's apartment, of every Jewish solicitor's office stood a party picket, who barred access to everyone.

The beginning - that was the start of anti-Jewish legislation in the first months after the seizure of power, the exclusion of Jews from the civil service and from a number of professions.

It is not the case - as we often hear - that we only learnt of all the terrible things after the war. When I left Germany in May 1933 - 21 years of age - I already knew of the concentration camps in Oranienburg and Sachsenhausen, and was aware of the Gestapo torture chamber in the cellars of the *Rote Fahne* newspaper building. I then knew who was responsible for the Reichstag fire. On the 1 April. I was suspended as a *Referendar* at the Wedding district court in Berlin. On the same day my father was suspended as a solicitor; my older sister who was a teacher at a grammar school in Frankfurt/Main, lost her job; my younger sister still at primary school was thrown out. Only my mother, who at that time was not working, was spared. The life of an entire family was turned upside-down in one day. And in addition that evening we (the only Jews in the district) were harangued for twenty minutes outside the cottage we had rented some way from the city by the SA Men: *Juden raus, Juden raus*'. Could this possibly be misinterpreted?

I remember, how on the evening before my departure, at a family party where I saw old friends and acquaintances for the last time, I pleaded for hours: 'Send the children away at least! Don't you see that this is the end of German Jewry?' I can still recall my words exactly. Naturally I was not aware and could not foresee that all Jews were to be murdered. But the fact that there would no longer be a worthwhile existence for Jews in Nazi Germany, was all too clear to me, and that the Nazis would not change their fanatical course was equally clear. It was a great tragedy that most people did not realise this, that they failed to recognise the final break with a state operating under the rule of the law, that they believed it was a transitory phenomenon.

And then came 1935 and the Nuremberg Laws which stripped the Jews of their civil rights signifying the beginning of the final exclusion of Jews from economic life. And now the chapter of Aryanisation began, one of the most dreadful of the entire period, whereby thousands and thousands of people from large concerns to the smallest individual enterprises pounced upon Jewish property and tried to procure for themselves whatever was going at the lowest price and even sometimes for nothing. Blackmail was the order of the day.

And then came the Night of the Pogrom; the culmination of this process. However, a war was needed to execute fully the anti-Jewish programme.

Let me tell you how I experienced this development in my Geneva office, which had become one of the most important observation posts of the fate of the Jews in the Second World War.

From the very beginning of the war, during the Polish campaign, terrible atrocities were perpetrated in West Prussia. Thousands of Jews were murdered in Posen and Bromberg. The white papers of various governments reported these events in great detail.

From the end of 1940 to the middle of 1941 terrible news reached us sporadically. The Jews of Poland, several millions, were stuck inside ghettos sealed off from the outside world. There was the first resettlement to Lublin; deportations from the Reich began; there were reports of shootings in the ghettos and shocking famine where special hunger rations were provided for Jews. And when the Russian campaign began in the summer of 1941 we soon received terrible news of atrocities in the East. We heard from various parts that mass executions of Jews had taken place on the Eastern front. Here 10,000, there 5,000, there 20,000. The reports continued to multiply.

In the autumn of 1941, reports started coming in of experiments which involved injecting Jews with various substances. News came in of the deployment of buses used for gassing Jews. At first, one could not believe such reports, but then they increased. Despite all this, we did not yet know of the extermination order.

In October 1941, I wrote a letter to Nahum Goldman in New York telling him of the awful reports from the East. 'If it goes on any longer', I said, 'very few Jews will survive the war'.

Let me interrupt my account and remind you what the Nazi leaders were doing, as we now know.

The decision to exterminate the Jews must have been taken at the start of the Russian campaign. On 31 July 1941 Goering sent a command to Heydrich to prepare everything for the 'Final Solution' of the Jewish Question. The extermination squads had been ready on the Eastern front since May 1941. The first extermination camp in Chelmno came into operation in December 1941, followed by Belzec and Sobibor. The first gassing in Auschwitz took place in September 1941, but still on an experimental basis. The Wannsee Conference at the end of January 1942 mobilised all the ministries and agencies of the Reich for the 'Final Solution'. Mass-transportation to the East took place from March 1942. Treblinka functioned from 23 July 1942 onwards. According to a letter from Himmler to Heydrich in April 1942, Hitler had decided on the 'Final Solution' and made Himmler and Heydrich responsible for its implementation.

I continue with my account of how the whole picture unfolded before us. In March 1942 a colleague from the Jewish Agency, Richard Lichtheim, and I as representatives of the World Jewish Congress decided to go to the Apostolic Nuncio in Bern and appeal to the Vatican, to try at least to put a stop to this process in Catholic countries where priests were actually in powerful government positions.

On request we presented a memorandum in which we listed, country by country, what we knew of the Jewish situation in Catholic countries and where the phrases 'liquidation of all Jews' or 'Extermination' were used several times. Nothing else could be the goal of such measures. That was six weeks after the Wannsee Conference.⁶

In June 1942 the Polish government-in-exile in London published a report of the 'Bund' according to which 700,000 Jews were already dead. Shortly after this, the World Jewish Congress held a press conference in London in which it announced that there were more than a million victims. That

was the first publication of this information in the press, which hitherto had published nothing on the persecution of the Jews.

It was at the end of July 1942 that the first authentic news report came from German sources regarding the plan for the complete annihilation of European Jewry.⁷ A major industrialist, who had access to Hitler's headquarters came to Switzerland and reported that a plan was being discussed to deport the total European Jewish population, three-and-a-half to four million, to the East and murder them there. The method to be used was being debated. There was talk of hydrocyanic acid. (The cyanide gas, which was used for extermination was produced from hydrocyanic acid). The industrialist recounted all this to his business friends to unburden his conscience and to warn the Jews. The Swiss business friends informed the press secretary of the Swiss Jewish community, Dr Benjamin Sagalowitz and he addressed himself immediately to me because it concerned news that had implications far beyond Switzerland.

Six weeks later the same industrialist came to Switzerland a second time and reported that he was now certain that it was no longer a plan on paper, but a policy in the course of being implemented.

The industrialist in question was Eduard Schulte. He was managing director of one of the largest mining concerns with 30,000 workers. Historians maintain that his sources of information were either the Gauleiter of Silesia, Hanke, or a cousin who worked in counter-espionage under Admiral Canaris. He never mentioned it himself and it cannot be ruled out that there was a third source.

Ladies and Gentlemen, today we are aware of what happened. But at that time, when I received the news, it took me two days and nights to convince myself of the veracity of the news. In spite of everything we knew - and we in my Geneva office certainly knew more than the man in the street - this was without doubt an atrocious piece of news. Was it not a piece of misinformation? I naturally made inquiries about the trustworthiness of the industrialist and made absolutely sure that he was a perfectly reliable source.

Why did I convince myself, unlike so many who received the news later? There are three main reasons:

1. Hitler had already made threats to this effect on several occasions publicly. In his speeches of 30 January 1939, 30 January 1941 and 30 January 1942 (always on the anniversary of the seizure of power) he had warned and threatened: 'This war will terminate in the destruction of the Jewish people in Europe'. *Mein Kampf* and his warnings had not been taken seriously. Did the mistake need to be repeated a second time?
2. A shocking wave of arrests had taken place on 14 and 15 July 1942 throughout Western Europe. In Amsterdam, Brussels, Antwerp, Paris, Lyon and Marseilles tens of thousands of Jews were suddenly arrested and prepared for deportation. The first deportation trains had set off for the East. We knew for a long time of the deportation of Jews from Berlin, Vienna, Prague and other areas of Eastern and Central Europe. But no one understood the suddenness with which the wave of arrests in Western Europe had been carried out. Schulte's news made sense of everything. What it was all about became clear.
3. I convinced myself that the Nazis were capable of such deeds. My German ancestry plus my experiences of the Nazis played a part in this particular case. Their brutality and fanaticism were not new to me. I had seen them on the streets, on the day of the seizure of power, on the Day of Boycott and on other occasions. I remembered the student elections in Freiburg i.Br. and Heidelberg in 1929/30 in which I took part - in Prussia they had already been suspended for a long time, because the Nazis had won over all large majorities - and in which we republican students confronted the terror of the Nazi students. I remembered how the Nazis chased us Jewish students and professors - probably about 1930/31, long before the seizure of power - out of the lecture theatres of the University of Berlin with

rubber truncheons and how we had to jump out of the windows in order not to be beaten up.

I decided therefore to convey the news to the Americans and Britons in Switzerland - the Soviet Russians had no representation in Switzerland - and visit their consulates on the 8 August 1942. I made three requests: to inform their respective governments; to have the news examined directly by their secret services; and to send a telegram from me to the president of the World Jewish Congress, Dr. Stephen Wise, in New York as well as to the chairman of the British section of the World Jewish Congress in London, Labour MP Sydney Silverman. The Legations in Bern transmitted my news to Washington and London.

But no one believed the news. The State Department refused to deliver the telegram to Dr Wise 'due to its manifestly unsubstantiated character'. The British government passed on the message to Labour MP Silverman after ten days but spoke of 'wild rumours born of Jewish fear' and it was not taken seriously. Sumner Welles, the Undersecretary of State at the State Department in Washington forbade publication, after Wise had been informed by Silverman, until it could be verified. The Vatican was approached and so were all governments. They also did not believe it. The Vatican stated that it did indeed have reports of maltreatment of Jews but it could not confirm the accuracy of the news.⁸ Benes spoke of German provocation. The Soviet Ambassador Maiski was the only one to take the news seriously.

We in Geneva, therefore, searched for corroboration from other sources. And we found it during the months of August and September 1942 in increasing quantity.

First, we received two letters from Warsaw, written from outside the ghettos, addressed to a Jewish orthodox relief organisation reporting in somewhat veiled language the daily deportation of 6,000 Jews from Warsaw to Treblinka where there was no shadow of doubt that Jews were being murdered.

Then, there was a report from a young Jew, Gabriel Zivian, who had fled from Riga and eventually ended up with relatives in Switzerland. He most vividly described the fate of the Riga Jews, who nine months earlier had been taken out of the town, shot and buried in ditches: 36,000 of them in November and December 1941 without anyone knowing. Among them was the famous historian of the Jewish people, Simon Dubnov. I listened to the young man for eight hours in my office like an investigating judge.

And then there came a fantastic sounding report from a young Polish mechanic by the name of Isaac Lieber who had been arrested in Antwerp in the middle of July and deported to the East. He was a chauffeur to a young German officer stationed in the Stalingrad area. The German officer, who was tired of the war and had already lost two brothers decided to save this Jew and hid him in a transport train which drove all the way from the Stalingrad area to Paris Gare de l'Est, from where the young man escaped to Switzerland. He reported his conversations with the German officer whom he questioned thoroughly about the fate of those who had been deported with him. The officer had given the following answer: 'Those who can be used for work - mainly fortifications work on the Eastern front - will be employed. Those who are not fit for work will be murdered. Those who prove no longer fit for work will also be murdered'. It was so simple - the entire tragedy was summed up in three sentences. I also listened to this man for hours and wrote a protocol.

Finally I got hold of corroboration - which for me was of great significance - on the part of the Vice President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Professor Carl J. Burckhardt, who confirmed to us and later to the American Consul that he had received reports from two German diplomats that did not leave one in any doubt as to the plan of making Europe *judenrein*.

We presented this entire material - a memorandum of about 30 pages⁹ - to the American Minister in Bern in October 1942. When this material eventually reached Washington in November 1942 – three months after my first report - Washington believed it and allowed the release of the news. However, hundreds of thousands had been killed in the meantime.

This finally led to a statement by the Allied governments issued on 17 December 1942 in Washington, London and Moscow.¹⁰ The statement spoke of 'reports, which left no room for doubt, that the Germans are carrying out their often reiterated intention of annihilating the Jewish people in Europe. The number of completely innocent men, women and children runs into hundreds of thousands'. The statement warned that those responsible would be punished.

I had already submitted a proposal for such a statement to our New York office back in October 1941.

Now the world knew. Now all governments knew. Now something had to be done.

Jewish groups in the free world organised large protest demonstrations in New York, London and elsewhere. They presented a rescue programme in twelve points and demanded action. Under this pressure, the American and British governments called a conference in Bermuda to study the problem.

Months passed. The greatest secrecy surrounded the conference. But when the secrecy lifted it transpired that nothing whatsoever had been decided. In actual fact nothing at all happened.

And with this I come to the most difficult problem.

Why did no one believe reports of the Final Solution and

why was virtually nothing done or very little?

There are a number of reasons for this:

1. No one was prepared for such a situation: there was no precedent for it. This showed the true uniqueness of the 'Final Solution'. It had never happened before that an entire people - men, women, children, babies, the old and the infirm - were consigned to death with bureaucratic precision.
2. The fact that reports of atrocities from the First World War later proved false made people sceptical about the veracity of these horrific reports.
3. A third reason was the absolute secrecy of the 'Final Solution'. Himmler said in a speech to the SS leaders in October 1943: 'We will never mention it and there will be no trace of it'. There were other similar witness accounts. A special language had been invented: 'Final Solution', resettlement, special treatment - all this meant nothing other than extermination.
4. And then there was antisemitism also in the Allied camp. Nazi propaganda in the West was far more effective than one had commonly assumed. There were large organisations under Nazi direction in the United States such as the German 'Bund'. There were antisemitic propagandists, who inveighed against the Jews on the radio such as Father Coughlin and Gerald L. K. Smith. The German Embassy also played a part in disseminating such propaganda. Action on behalf of the Jews was not popular. A war on behalf of the Jews was not popular. America wanted to stay out of the war and was inclined to neutrality and

some Americans accused Roosevelt of dragging the country into the war for the sake of the Jews.

One can clearly detect antisemitism in some of the acts undertaken by the authorities, particularly the State Department in, for example, the policy regarding the issuing of visas to Jews. The German quota was never exhausted, but German Jews were refused visas. The suppression of my famous telegram of August 1942 was further proof of this attitude. At a certain point in time, instructions were given to send no more reports from private people or organisations through the Legation in Switzerland. - This was obviously directed against me. The intention was to isolate the source of information so that there was less stir caused and less pressure put on the authorities. When the Costa Rican President pressed for action on behalf of the jeopardised Jews in Europe, the American Ambassador told him: 'It is all based on reports from a Jewish leader in Switzerland'. When in April 1943 I put forward rescue proposals for help in various countries and telegraphed them to Washington, it was not until December that the first steps were finally taken.

By that time some of the proposals were no longer feasible. Moreover, Roosevelt and Morgenthau had agreed to the plan months earlier. Morgenthau and his colleagues in the Treasury laid bare the State Department's act of sabotage by submitting a sensational memorandum, which bore the title: 'On the acquiescence of this government in the murder of the Jews'. This led to the one and only effective action of the rescue policy, the establishment of the War Refugee Board.

In England, the situation was not that different. Anti-Zionist policies, in the aftermath of the White Paper of 1939, prevailed. Everything was aimed at preventing Jewish immigration into Palestine. If one goes through the records of the Foreign Office and the Colonial Office from the war period, it often seems that it is Jews undertaking desperate efforts to save their co-religionists who were the enemy and not the Nazis. Bernard Wasserstein's book on the British policy towards the Jews during the war is filled with such examples.¹¹

5. Most important of all was that at that period in time the Jews were of no political consequence whatsoever. They were completely powerless. They were the precise opposite of what Hitler made them out to be, possessing no political choice in the war. To whom could they turn? To Hitler? Consequently, they were not taken account of.
6. Finally, even knowing the facts one did not want to believe them.¹² Somehow reality was cast aside. Confrontation with absolute evil could not be accepted, even if one was aware of it. Simply, one could not live with such knowledge. In spite of being aware of this tragedy, everyone hoped in their heart of hearts, that the whole affair was a fantasy.

I would like to give two typical examples of this.

One day in 1943 – or somewhat later – I received a parcel from the Association of Polish Jews in America, from New York, in which I had been sent 30,000 Jewish addresses in Poland. I was to send a food parcel to each one. On receiving the package I thought I had lost my senses. Had it still not sunk in, what was going on? Those people who had despatched the addresses, were well aware of my reports. Not one of their addresses was any longer correct or valid. All the addressees had been evacuated, deported to the camps and most of them were probably dead. This was all common knowledge to the senders. But they could not accept it, they had to do something. They could not remain idle. Thus addresses were collected and sent to me and parcels were ordered . . .

Another example. In November 1942 the Polish underground movement sent a Polish officer, Jan Karski, to the West to explain the fate of the Jews in Poland to the Western World. He had been secretly smuggled into the Warsaw Ghetto for two days and, accompanied by two Jewish leaders, had with his own eyes seen life and death in the Ghetto. He had even secretly visited a concentration camp and seen what went on there. Having arrived in the West, he met many prominent political leaders and reported events in Poland suggesting what should be done. He met *inter alia* the Polish Foreign Minister, Edward Raczynski, the British Foreign Minister, Antony Eden;

he saw F. D. Roosevelt, Cordell Hull, Stimson. But in most cases he was met with disbelief. He subsequently commented on, amongst other things, how he came to meet the Supreme Court judge of the United States, Felix Frankfurter, one of the most respected Jews in the United States. On concluding his report, Frankfurter said to him: 'I can't believe it.' Whereupon Karski retorted, 'You mean I'm lying?' 'No', answered Frankfurter, 'I did not say you are lying, I said that I can't believe it'. Here you have the essential difference between knowing and accepting. It was a schizophrenic reaction. The paradox was that this reaction, which had terrible consequences because it spawned inaction, was perhaps the most positive aspect of this tragedy. Man refused to live with this absolute evil and thus in a certain way restored belief in man.

Small comfort

Naturally many attempts were made to save those who could be saved. I myself proposed dozens of rescue actions.

The response was, on most occasions, that the war must be won. That had absolute priority: we could not afford to dissipate our military strength. It never became clear why, for example, the railway lines which led to Auschwitz and the gas ovens there, had not been bombed, something I and many had demanded. Chaim Weizmann had personally turned to Churchill on this matter. Churchill agreed as did Eden. However, nothing happened. It proved too difficult, one was told: the fighter planes did not operate in such a wide radius. Nevertheless, the West did already possess absolute air supremacy in Europe in 1944, as we now know, and did at the time bomb the Buna works of *IG. Farben* in Monowitz on several occasions - a mere five kilometres from Auschwitz.¹³

Eventually there was some success:

1. Several exchange agreements, whereby a number of Jews were taken to Palestine in exchange for Germans;
2. Certain relaxations of rules and guarantees to neutral powers to induce them to allow more Jews in;
3. The easing of the financial and food blockades in favour of victims of Nazism in response to my proposals of April 1943 and the issuing of the first licence to transmit \$25,000 from the American authorities for this purpose, which was to be followed by many more;
4. The creation of a special American authority to help save victims of Hitler, The War Refugee Board, the necessity of which Morgenthau had prevailed upon Roosevelt in January 1944. The task of the Board was, essentially, to implement my own and other people's proposals for saving the Jews. This changed the situation appreciably but came far too late.

In the last year of the war - from January 1944 to May 1945 - 20 million dollars was spent by Jewish organisations to help save victims of Nazism in this manner with the help and support of the American government. A generous parcel supply through the International Red Cross was financed by this means. The underground movements in various countries received support and were supplied with arms; the acquisition of false papers for tens of thousands of people was financed; military-protected children's transports to the Swiss and Spanish borders were organised. With the help of the War Refugee Board the only really effective political action to save Hungarian Jews was undertaken, which did at least save the Jews of Budapest. The bribing of individual Nazi functionaries to release several thousands of Jews was also supported. This took place in connection with the Kastner-Saly Mayer-Becher, Sternbuch-Musy, Storch and Masur-Kersten-Himmler operations. The Bulgarian government was encouraged successfully to resist the deportation of Bulgarian Jews. Finally we managed to prevent - and this was probably the most significant deed of all - the total annihilation of all concentration camp survivors at the end of the war through the negotiations between Carl J. Burckhardt from the International Red Cross and

Kaltenbrunner¹⁴ and between Graf Bernadotte from the Swedish Red Cross and Himmler. These negotiations probably saved the lives of hundreds of thousands.

Could more have been done? Of course. Not that Hitler could have been stopped, once the war had started. For that it was too late. But before the war it would have been possible: in 1933, still in 1935, and even in 1936 on the occasion of the remilitarization of the Rhineland. Perhaps even in 1938. After this the lives of millions of Jews could certainly not have been saved, but several hundred thousands in all probability, yes, if one would have had more energy and imagination and applied more unconventional methods.

Lessons to be learned

We Jews have learnt that the First Commandment for us, is to confront the past, in other words, not to forget what happened. Be mindful! Zakhor! it says over and over again in the Hebrew Bible. Loss of memory is loss of identity and responsibility. The collective memory is the timeless identity of the Jewish people through the generations. 'Loss of memory' or 'forgetting', Elie Wiesel said, 'would be betrayal. If we would have survived to betray the dead, it would have been better not to survive.'

We Jews have learnt that one must never underestimate the enemy, as the German Jews did in the 1930s, and never believe that one can confront through logical discourse deep irrational undercurrents and tendencies embedded in a people in a specific situation. Our 'damned' Jewish optimism, in Schopenhauer's words, which had helped us struggle through many predicaments and survive is no reliable guide in the brutal power struggles of the twentieth century.

We have learnt that one must combat false theories and hostile ideologies right from the start and not wait until they have gained powerful support. The revival of doctrines which preach racial inequality are just as dangerous as the growing movement of pseudo-academics who dispute or relativize the existence of the Holocaust. We have learnt that no lie is too big not to be believed under certain political and social conditions.

We have not forgotten how the whole world totally abandoned us in the hour of our greatest need, how our fate was cold-bloodedly surrendered to moral indifference and political opportunism and that, in the final analysis, we cannot count on anyone but ourselves.

We have transformed ourselves internally, as a direct result of the experiences of Shoah and the experiences of the re-emergence of a Jewish state. But we are still living the terrible trauma of Shoah. We are still struggling with ourselves and with God to comprehend the sense of this unique tragedy: six million men, women and children, whose only crime was to belong to the Jewish race. How could it happen? Why did it happen? Where was God when it happened?

There is no Jewish answer to these questions. There are differing opinions but not one is satisfactory. In his '614th Commandment' Emil Fackenheim summed up the best possible consensus:¹⁵

At Auschwitz Jews came face to face with absolute evil. They were and still are singled out by it, but in the midst of it they hear an absolute commandment: *Jews are forbidden to grant posthumous victories* to Hitler. They are commanded to survive as Jews, lest the Jewish people perish. They are commanded to remember the victims of Auschwitz, lest their memory perish. They are forbidden to despair of man and his world, and to escape into either cynicism or otherworldliness, lest they co-operate in delivering the world over to the forces of Auschwitz. Finally they are forbidden to despair of the God of Israel, lest Judaism perish...

Christians have to reflect how it was possible that the world stood by and watched this unprecedented catastrophe without taking decisive action. How it was possible that ethical and moral reflexes simply did not function. How it was possible that hundreds, in fact thousands, who took part in this process - with few exceptions - co-operated without protest or merely looked away and made themselves culpable through their silence.

Christians have to consider how it was possible that no public or official stand on the part of the governing bodies of the Catholic or Protestant church vis-a-vis the November Pogrom of 1938, the deportations and the extermination policy, was taken. And that it was left to individual courageous church ministers to criticise these actions.

Christians ought to think about how it was possible, that even in the most courageous and beautiful church-led protests against Nazism – the Barmen statement of the Synod of the Confessing Church of May 1934 and even the Stuttgart declaration of the Council of Evangelical Churches of 19 October 1945, the so-called confession of guilt - not a word was said about the Jews. They must equally consider how it was possible that even in the circles of the Christian German opposition, a special statute regarding Jews for the post-war period was under discussion.

How could the commandments stop short of 'love one's neighbour as oneself' and 'I am my brother's keeper' completely lose their meaning or at any rate, stop short to applying to fellow-men who were Jews?

Christians must seriously reflect upon how far Christian theology over the centuries, from Chrysostom to Luther, and from Stöcker up until the present has contributed to the demonisation of the Jews and to the image of the eternally wandering Jew standing under a curse. Christians have to give serious thought to how the confusion in theological anti-Judaism through the centuries turned into brutally inhuman contempt for the Jews. For, however unchristian National Socialism was in its essence, it could never have effectively executed its anti-Jewish programme without such a background.

The new Christian theology concerning Jews and Judaism as it has been defined, in particular in the statement of the Assembly of the World Council of Churches in New Delhi in 1961, in the documents of Vatican II and the Commission of the Holy See concerning the Jews and in the Ecumenical Considerations of the World Council of Churches of 1982, is the beginning of the answer to these questions. My attendance here is a signal that I take these efforts seriously. But we are still at the beginning of this new dawn and the new theology is still in many respects the concern of a small intellectual elite which requires everyone's collaboration if it is to become an everyday reality and the masses of our communities are to grasp the significance of it.

We all, however, have to recognise and analyse the specific political, economic and social conditions under which Hitler came to power. Although history generally does not tend to repeat itself, we should be aware of the fact that without a triple crisis, the Nazis would never have come to power: a national crisis, engendered by the resentment against the provisions of the Versailles Treaty which were felt to be unjust; an economic crisis, caused by the Great Crash of 1929 producing more than seven million unemployed in Germany; and a social crisis of profound dimensions, brought about by the revolt of the impoverished masses of the middle class desperately fighting against their proletarianisation. The combination of these three factors was responsible for Hitler's rise to power and only if one clearly recognises these causes, can one protect the world from a relapse into a similar state of affairs.

The political response to the Nazi atrocities on the part of the peoples of the world was the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in various Human Rights Conventions drawn up by the UN, whose aim is to secure political, economic and social rights inclusive of religious rights for everyone. It can only be hoped that in a world in which it seems that the great political tensions of

the last decades have retreated into the background, making way for closer international co-operation across all frontiers, this common Human Rights protection will be strengthened and executed more effectively.

Maybe it is time, in this new atmosphere, at the moment at which we commemorate the victims, to return to those ideas and dreams, which we all had and shared in those days of liberation across all frontiers in the Grand Alliance and to renew them in our joint endeavour.

It is certainly far from easy to achieve such a goal. It depends, above all, on our will and our resoluteness.

In this context, I would like to conclude with the words of a poet, who belonged to the survivors. It sounds like a legacy:

Of all wonders the greatest

Is surely the wonder of life.

And death doth o'ertake us

Only when willpower fails.

Hermann Adler¹⁶

Notes

1. The following details are based on the account given by Heinz Lauber, *Juden-Pogrom: 'Reichskristallnacht' November 1938 in Grossdeutschland* (Gerlingen 1981), 123ff.
2. Lauber, 78.
3. Lauber, 80.
4. Lauber, 83.
5. Lauber, 87-8.
6. The Memorandum is reprinted in Saul Friedlander's *Pie XII et le IIIe Reich* (Paris 1964), 104ff and in John Morley, *Vatican Diplomacy and the Jews during the Holocaust 1939-1943* (New York 1980), 212ff.
7. The events referred to have been described in several publications, for the first time in the diaries of Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau jr in *Collier's Magazine* especially in the issue of 1 November 1947. Compare *inter alia* also: Stephen S. Wise, *Challenging Years* (New York 1949), 274ff; John Morton Blum, *From the Morgenthau Diaries, Years of War 1941-1945* (Boston 1967), 207ff; Arthur D. Morse, *While Six Million Died* (New York 1967), 3ff; Walter Laqueur, *The Terrible Secret* (London 1980), 77ff; David S. Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews* (New York 1984), 42ff; Walter Laqueur and Richard Breitman, *Breaking the Silence* (New York 1986), notably 143ff.
8. For this see: Gerhart M. Riegner, *A Warning to the World. The efforts of the World Jewish Congress to mobilise the Christian churches against the final solution* (Cincinnati 1983), 7 and Notes.
9. See Memorandum in the Archive of the World Jewish Congress in Geneva; the original is

- to be found in the Archives of the State Department. See Breitman in Laqueur, 273.
10. The Declaration statement was issued by the governments of Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Greece, Luxemburg, Holland, Norway, Poland, USA, USSR, UK, Yugoslavia and the French National Committee (France libre).
 11. See Bernard Wasserstein, *Britain and the Jews of Europe 1939-1945* (London and Oxford 1979).
 12. This aspect was repeatedly stressed and documented by Walter Laqueur in his book *The Terrible Secret: an Investigation into the Suppression of Information about Hitler's 'Final Solution'* (London 1980).
 13. See David S. Wyman, 'Why Auschwitz was never bombed', *Commentary*, May 1978, 37; also Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews* (New York 1984), Chapter 15, 288ff.
 14. For this see, in particular, Monty Noam Penkower, *The Jews Were Expendable* (Chicago 1983), 230ff.
 15. See Emil Fackenheim, 'Jewish faith and the Holocaust: a fragment' in *The Jewish Thought of Emil Fackenheim* (Detroit 1987), 165.
 16. Hemann Adler, manuscript dedication in *Fieberworte von Verdammnis und Erlösung* (Basle 1948).
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Dr. Gerhart M. Riegner received an honorary doctorate at the Humboldt University in Berlin on 7 November 1988. The citation read: 'For his scholarly work in the struggle against anti-Judaism and antisemitism. For his tireless work in saving Jews persecuted by Hitlerite fascism and for his endeavours to contribute to the inter-religious dialogue for peace in the world.'