

Kristallnacht – by Ephraim Sales

Written November 7, 2008, on the seventieth anniversary of Kristallnacht.

Kristallnacht. Yes, I was there.

Seventy years ago, I was a nine year old boy living in the city of Berlin, Germany, where I was born. It was November, 1938. My father and mother were orthodox Jews and owned two Jewish bookstores in Berlin. One on Grenadier Strasse, West Berlin, now Berlin, and the other on was in Charlottenberg, East Berlin, now Berlin. My father was a loving, hardworking man who was very bright and a Jewish scholar.

I attended a Jewish day school in Berlin. Every day on my long walk to the Jewish school and home, I would fight with the Nazi youth. I would wrestle with them. Every school day. On November 8th or November 9th, 1938, seventy years ago, I left home for school in the morning. I walked a block or two and walked past several stores that looked strange. The outside windows were broken and all the merchandise in the window was strewn about in the street mixed with glass fragments. After seeing this for several stores, I turned back and went home. I was frightened and confused by what I saw.

Later that day, my father and I went to Grenadier Strasse where his Jewish bookstore was. There he and I saw a hundred men of so in civilian clothing breaking and smashing the glass front to his Jewish bookstore and throwing everything into the middle of the street. The criminals, actually Nazis wearing civilian clothing, removed everything from the bookstore. Books, Judaic art. All the books in the windows, inside the store, the back room, were dumped, all these thousands of books and Judaic art in the middle of the street, and they lit a fire. I never knew that there were so many books in his store. I was astonished at the largest, scariest fire I have ever seen. I can see it now. The German Police stood by and did nothing. I was frightened and hid inside my father's jacket. I was nine years old. This was Kristallnacht, the night of broken glass. Kristallnacht took place in every city in Germany, breaking and smashing Jewish stores, destroying Jewish property, and at the same time, destroying Jewish synagogues, and rounding up Jews for concentration camps.

On this tragic anniversary, and every day, remembrance is essential. We remember the 1.5 million children murdered in the relentless Nazi pursuit of the Final Solution. We remember how many borders were callously closed to European Jews when there was a chance to escape. We remember that our own country, the U.S., yielding to domestic isolationism and antisemitism, did far less than it could have to shelter European Jews. We remember that just weeks before Kristallnacht, the British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, traveled to Germany for the third time in two weeks and returned to London to assure the British public, there would be peace in our time.

Kristallnacht reminds us of the lurking capacity for inhumanity that resides in the human spirit.

Kristallnacht reminds us of the nations that prided themselves on advanced levels of civilization yet had the capacity for barbarism that exploded in ways never before witnessed and killed 40 to 50 million people. This is something that will remain in my memory to the end of time. I have involved my children and grandchildren in this, and hope they too will remember to the end of time. To remember is to perpetuate Judaism and life.

