

November 9th & 10th, 1938 - 83 years ago - just 4 days before my 20th birthday. The destruction of synagogues, Jewish homes and businesses in Germany came to be known as Kristallnacht - the "Night of Broken Glass". The assassination in Paris of a German diplomat by a 17 year old German-born Polish Jew provided the pretext for these attacks on Jews by the Nazis & citizens. Kristallnacht was the turning point for Jews in Germany; Hitler finally had the excuse he had been waiting for: to launch a campaign of terror against the Jews.

Before I tell you about my personal experience of Kristallnacht, I would like to tell you about the events that led up to it. There were a great many Polish Jews living in Germany in 1938. According to my recollection they, nor their children who had been born in Germany, were allowed to become German citizens. They were simply considered to be of Polish nationality or stateless. However, one night, without warning, all the Polish Jews were rounded up and shipped to Poland. When they arrived at the border, they were denied entrance into Poland. There they were in November - cold and hungry, without food or shelter - in no man's land. Somehow, one of the women got a letter out to her brother who was studying in Paris, telling him of their plight. When he read the letter, he went berserk, got a gun and went to the German embassy with the intention of killing the consul. Instead, the first man he met was an attaché, whom he shot at pointblank range. When the man died two days later, Hitler finally had the excuse he had been waiting for: to launch a campaign of terror against the Jews.

At the time, I was staying with a family in Düsseldorf, Germany - an hour away from my parents. The first indication of the impending horror was a howling mob which gathered in front of the house where I was staying. This was followed by the sound of breaking glass and the sickening crash of a door being kicked in. Four or five men stomped into the room. They were not wearing Nazi uniforms. Most likely they had been ordered to leave their uniforms at home so as to look like "ordinary citizens" venting their "just wrath" against the Jews for the crime in Paris. They proceeded to throw everything they could lay their hands on out the windows - furniture, crystal, china, silver, clothes, even a piano - everything was hurled through the shattered windows, very much to the approval of the cheering mob in the street below.

No sooner had they left, when two armed storm troopers appeared and arrested my host. The way they barked orders, they seemed like a two man firing squad! I held my breath. I thought they were going to execute him right then and there!! Instead, he was dragged off to a concentration camp along with 30,000 other Jewish men and teenage boys that day, including my sister's husband and his brother.

I don't know what possessed me, but I went down into the street to see if anything could be salvaged, only to be driven back by the jeering mob, screaming obscenities at me. I remember a young girl threw a scarf at me and suggested I hang myself with it.

Strangely enough, I saw no looting. After all, these were "well-disciplined" Germans, obeying orders. Either that, or, by the time these things reached the street from the second floor from which they had been hurled, there was nothing left worth picking up. I found out later that they were not so reluctant about looting Jewish-owned stores, which was much more lucrative.

The newspaper reported that these “good Germans” were collecting items to donate to the poor. Yeah, right! Then, adding insult to injury, the Jews were forced to pay for all the broken glass and damage done during those two nights of terror.

My only thought now was to get home to my parents who lived an hour away. I grabbed my passport and stuffed it inside my bra in case my purse was searched; I didn't know what they would do if they found out I was Jewish!! I thought we would have to flee the country immediately, in my panic having completely forgotten that there was no place to flee to! Virtually all countries had closed their borders to the Jews by then. In 1938-1939, the U.S. German/Austrian & Czech quotas were completely filled. Having a sponsor was no good until your quota number came up. Mine took ten years to come up, even though I applied for my quota number just two weeks after my sister did, and she came to the U.S. ten years before I did!

On my way to the railroad station, I saw flames and realized that the beautiful old synagogue had been set on fire. In the distance, I heard the jeering and laughter of the crowd as they found ever-new victims. Very much to my relief, I found my parents unharmed and nothing had been disturbed. Perhaps this was because not long before, we had been forced out of the large house my grandfather had built in 1870. We had then moved into a tiny apartment in a neighboring city where we were not known. However, our Jewish landlord's apartment had been ransacked, and his valuable paintings slashed to ribbons.

After having lived through unspeakable horrors and degradations, most of the Jewish men who had been rounded up during Kristallnacht were eventually released from the concentration camps - except for those whose ashes were sent to their families. My sister and her husband were fortunate to leave for the US shortly thereafter. His brother tried to flee to Switzerland where he had family - and was never heard from again. A few months later, I was fortunate to escape to England, where I survived as a maid and later as a waitress. For my parents, it was too late. They were trapped in Germany, and perished in Auschwitz, as did my oldest sister. She had foreseen the impending horror and had fled to Holland shortly after Hitler came to power in 1933, where she thought she would be safe. And she was - until she ran into a distant relative in Amsterdam in January of 1945. He told her that he was in charge of the transports taking Jews to the camps, and that he could make things easier for her if she came out of hiding and went with him on the train. She went, and ended up being killed in Auschwitz. This relative survived, just like he and his family had survived the St. Louis boat being turned away from US shores, resulting in over half of its passengers who were returned to Europe dying at the hands of the Nazis.

In accordance with the US quota system established in 1924, the US. issued visas that allowed 27,370 refugees from Germany to enter the US in 1939. But by 1942, because of the war and the new immigration restrictions that were enforced because the US government feared refugees might be Nazi spies, the German allotment of 27, 370 refugees was reduced by 93% to just 1,966. Just think how many Jews could have been saved if the US had been more open to admitting refugees!

For those of us who thought that we could wait out the Hitler era, Kristallnacht was a wake-up call. It warned those who could get out of Germany. Unfortunately for most, it was too late. None of us could have foreseen the Final Solution.

Epilogue: After the war ended, while waiting for my US quota number to come up, I returned to Germany for 3 years. I was attached to the US Army as an Allied Civilian Employee, working first in censorship and later as a translator at the Nuremberg trials. In the fall of 1948, my U.S. quota number finally came up and I left Germany for good for the United States, where I have lived for the past 73 years. Having been born just two days after the Armistice was signed ending World War I, I will turn 103 years old on November 13, grateful to have lived this long to tell this tale. May nothing like this ever happen again.

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October 2018
Diane Lansing

Photo by

It was printed in several Buffalo publications, but then took on a life of its own! :

*My Mom's BBC Interview:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/w172w1ftx5r2d86>

My mom's interview is from 18:09 - 23:00.

*The BBC found my mom through this interview made by the Holocaust Resource Center of Buffalo:

<http://www.hrcbuffalo.org/ruth-lansing>

Tim Cook, CEO of Apple, heard my mom's BBC interview & included her story in his acceptance speech for the ADL's "Courage Against Hatred" award:

*Never Is Now 2018 - Presentation of ADL's Courage Against Hate Award to Tim Cook, Apple CEO: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PYEcxT95LY0> In his acceptance speech (which starts at 5:43, after the lengthy introduction) , he quotes my Mom's story at 13:22 - 14:37 and 16:35-16:45). And to thank her for using her story, he sent her an iPad as a belated 100th birthday present!!

And the Buffalo News carried it:

https://buffalonews.com/news/local/apple-ceo-draws-inspiration-from-amherst-womans-kristallnacht-recollection/article_9672ae3b-ca5c-5eba-a5d6-37376b157372.html

More about the St. Louis story:

<https://www.history.com/news/wwii-jewish-refugee-ship-st-louis-1939>

These oral histories are part of the Robert H. Jackson Center's Defenders of Freedom project:

*Ruth Lansing (2002) on the Nuremberg Trials:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E6RtlltsB3k>

*Ruth Lansing (2019) on Kristallnacht and Nuremberg Trials:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lp9ZigwaWXU>