

Kristallnacht

In late October of 1938, thousands of Polish-born Jews were expelled from Germany. Poland, however, refused to admit them and they were stranded in no-man's-land between Germany and Poland, not welcome in either country.

The son of one such couple, Herschel Grynszpan, sought to draw attention to the plight of these Jews by assassinating a minor German embassy official in Paris on November 6, 1938. The response of the Nazi government was immediate and extremely harsh.

On November 9, the Nazis embarked on a night of violence and vandalism throughout the German Reich, which now included Austria and the Sudetenland. In less than 48 hours, approximately 1,000 synagogues had been burned and their contents destroyed. Over 7,000 Jewish-owned businesses were damaged, with the windows shattered. Almost one hundred Jews were killed and close to 25,000 Jewish men were arrested and sent to concentration camps.

The Night of the Broken Glass, or Kristallnacht, shattered the illusion that Jews were safe in the Reich.



Germans pass by the broken shop window of a Jewish-owned business that was destroyed during Kristallnacht. Circa November 10, 1938. USHMM, courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration, College Park

“I got up in the morning and the maid made my breakfast. My parents were still in bed, and I went off to the trolley car to go to school. At the first corner we came to there was a big Jewish café that had outside patio seating. The chairs, the terrace and everything were all smashed. I thought, gee, I wonder what happened there.

Then we came down another street, and I saw stores smashed, windows smashed. I said, ‘God Almighty, they’re all Jewish people.’ I didn’t know what to do, but I thought I might as well go to school and find out something.

The further I got into the center of the city, no matter where I looked, there was nothing there any more. The merchandise was thrown out of all the Jewish stores, and everybody stood outside. I was so scared to get out of the trolley car. When I did, all I could see was the top of our synagogue: the flames were just coming out. And I was frozen.”

Lory Cahn
Breslau, Germany
Into the Arms of Strangers



Prayerbooks lie scattered on the floor of the choir loft in the Zerrennerstrasse synagogue, destroyed on Kristallnacht. Berlin. USHMM, courtesy of Stadtarchiv Pforzheim



On the morning after Kristallnacht, local residents watch as the Ober Ramstadt synagogue is destroyed by fire. USHMM, courtesy of Trudy Isenberg

