

SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT KRISTALLNACHT

by C. Peter R. Gossels

On or about November 9 of this year, many Jewish congregations and other institutions decided to honor the memory of Kristallnacht.

I believe that the commemoration of Kristallnacht is a mistake born of ignorance. This terrible event in the history of German Jews was perpetrated on them by Adolph Hitler, a young Austrian man, who had served in the German Army during the First World War. After the Armistice, he came to hate Jews and Communists, whom he blamed for causing Germany to lose the war and for the harsh terms imposed by the Allies on what he considered his country. This hate was compounded by his notion that he, like all true Germans, were part of an Aryan race that should, and would, create a powerful empire that would wreak revenge on those who had overwhelmed and those who had betrayed the German state that had lost the war.

So, as soon as he gained power as Chancellor of Germany in 1933, Hitler and his Nazi party began the process of driving the “impure” part of the population of Germany out of the country to make it “Judenrein”, free of Jews, Communists and others he considered impure.

Pure, or not, some Jewish people had lived in Germany since Roman times. They had lived there longer, in fact, than the ancestors of those living there now. And, despite massacres, expulsions and other anti-Semitic measures imposed on them over the centuries, there were approximately 650,000 Jews in Germany at the conclusion of the First World War, including veterans of that war, public servants, lawyers, doctors, scientists, professors, writers, business people as well as many others who had made substantial contributions to German society and those who were simply getting by.

The Nazis began by imprisoning Communists as well as most of their opponents, and continued by forcing Jews out of their jobs. My father, for one, lost his job as a professor at the University of Berlin. And the Nazis continued by stripping Jews of their citizenship and their civil rights, making it difficult for Jewish people to support themselves. As a result, more and more Jewish people tried to obtain visas from foreign countries so they could leave their homeland, but those who were lucky enough to obtain such a visa had to leave all their possessions behind to help finance the rebuilding of Hitler’s military during the 1930s.

Despite all this, nearly one half of the Jewish population of Germany had managed to leave the country by 1938, when Hitler and the Nazi party decided to shock the Jews who remained: Jews who were still hoping that better times might come, to get

out, by sending men to concentration camps, destroying synagogues and breaking the windows of the Jewish businesses that remained open. My great uncle, a dentist, was one of those sent to Dachau for three days before he was released.

Kristallnacht was simply the next to final step of Hitler's policy to drive the Jewish people out of Germany, and failing that, to kill them.

I asked some of my Jewish friends whether they thought we should recall the anniversary of Kristallnacht. The majority thought that we should do so, because they thought it would serve to educate the younger members of our Congregation, who might not recall or know of those events.

But I disagree. Kristallnacht was simply one violent component of the Nazi policy that led to the Holocaust; it had no significance of its own.

We should teach the young that public policies like those of the Nazis must be recognized and opposed as much as possible, especially where anti-Semites and their sympathizers rarely hide their hate and contempt for Jews. But we should not continue to infect our religious practices with the sort of "woe is me" Judaism that we inherited from the woeful conditions of the middle ages. Many of us already observe Tisha B'Av and commemorate the Holocaust on Yom HaShoah. We do not need to add another occasion to contemplate the tragedies that the Jewish people have suffered in the past.

In order to compete with the other faiths and belief systems prevalent in our country, we should continue to celebrate the three thousand year conversation that the Jewish people have recorded in their Tanach, the Talmud and the writings published since that time. We should celebrate the survival and contributions of the Jewish people to humanity, including Shabbat, the universal day of rest that did not exist two thousand years ago. We should enjoy our community, broadcast the teachings of Reform Judaism, continue our conversation about God and devote ourselves to doing what we can to make the world a better place for us and everyone else.