

TR-3812 Transcription

"Adventures in Judaism 139, Crystal Night." Hosted by Rabbi
Balfour Brickner. 1968.

F:[00:00] Now it is upon us. The jackboots are running in spurts of sudden blood light through the broken temples. It is Crystal Night.

Announcer: The Department of Public Affairs of this station, in cooperation with the Union of American Hebrew Congregations presents the award-winning *Adventures in Judaism*, relating the classic traditions of the Jewish religion to the problems and experiences of our day. Today's program is *Crystal Night*, the story of a single night in the 1930s, which changed the course of history. Our performers are Vivian Nathan, Sorrell Booke and James [Sloan?]. Now here is our host for the series, Rabbi Balfour Brickner, Director of Interfaith Activities for the UAHC. Rabbi Brickner.

Rabbi Brickner: Welcome to another *Adventure in Judaism*. Today our journey takes us back [01:00] not with nostalgia to some idyllic time or place, but to the night of November the 7th, 1938. In the city of Paris. It's an autumn evening. But already

there is a hint of winter in the wind that blows along the Seine. Paris is still at peace. The horrors of Hitlerism are only rumors here. The street is quiet where a 17-year-old boy slips out of his uncle's house. His name is Herschel Greenspan. Nobody pays any mind to him as he hurries along the street. He's just one more German Jew, a nonresident without a passport, without a resident's permit, without working papers, without a future, either, so far as anyone can foresee. What is he doing in Paris anyhow? [02:00] And where is he hurrying so fast and so intently? Only today Herschel had received a letter from his father. Nothing more than a brief note, really.

Mr. Greenspan: Your mother and I are to be deported back to Poland in a boxcar. Boxcar. Boxcar. Boxcar.

Rabbi Brickner: That is the end of all of their traveling and all their planning. The Greenspans left Poland in the first place so that their child could grow up and have a decent life in the one land where Jews thought they could be sure of a future, Germany. And now the Poles have decreed a special ordinance, that all Jewish passports will lose their validity [03:00] unless the official stamp is affixed within one month. A stamp that can be issued only in Poland. And so Herschel's

parents now are stateless, along with 20,000 other Polish Jews in Germany being rounded up to be shuttled back to the Polish border and dumped there. And what will happen to them then, Gestapo bayonets will force them forward. Polish machine guns will face them at the other end. They will be trapped in a no man's land where no one wants them. But Herschel is in Paris. Herschel is safe. Herschel is free as he walks along the dark streets, hurrying. Where?

Man: Yes, young man?

Herschel: I wish to buy a small revolver. [04:00]

Rabbi Brickner: A small revolver. And with the weight of it in his pocket, Herschel turns and heads through the Paris night, in the [*Lieu de Lil?*]. A German flag is fluttering outside the embassy as Herschel goes inside.

Man: Yes, boy.

Herschel: I wish to see the ambassador.

Man: The ambassador?

Herschel: It is very important.

Rabbi Brickner: And now a man appears at the door. It isn't the ambassador. It's a young man, one of the secretaries at the embassy. But Herschel doesn't have time to make such distinctions. He raises his arm from his pocket, he squeezes his finger against the trigger of the little gun. (shot) And again. (shot/shot) Five times in all. (shot/shot) Herschel Greenspan stands stock still in the lobby of the German Embassy in Paris. He has just assassinated the Third Secretary, Ernst vom Rath, himself an anti-Nazi, under surveillance by the Gestapo. [05:00] An innocent has murdered an innocent. But far away in the streets of Berlin Herschel Greenspan's shots are answered with an ominous echo. (glass crashing) (crowd sounds) The smashing of glass, the glass of shop windows followed by looting, a two-day orgy of destruction. First in the cities of Germany and then in other cities, all over Europe, wherever the Third Reich holds sway. When the pogrom was over, this was the official count.

Man: Seventy-five-hundred shops looted. Eight-hundred-fifteen shops destroyed. One-hundred-nineteen synagogues set on fire.

[06:00] Seventy-six destroyed completely. One-hundred-seventy-one houses set on fire or destroyed. Twenty thousand Jews arrested, 36 killed, 36 injured, an unknown number dead of suicide.

Rabbi Brickner: In Vienna alone 5,000 Jewish shops closed down in the two days following the pogrom. On November 9th the leaders of Germany headed by Hitler himself gathered in the Old Town Hall of Munich to celebrate the 15th anniversary of the unsuccessful Nazi push of 1923. The news of Von Roth's death has just come over the wires. Hitler announces it. Here is the pretext the Nazis need. Soon afterwards Herman Goering, Hitler's propaganda minister makes an ambiguous speech to the assembled officials. He does not invite German citizens to riot [07:00] against Jews, he merely reports certain demonstrations which he says cannot be condemned. The police should not interfere.

F: When I heard that a Jew had shot vom Rath I knew that our number was up. Something awful was going to happen. You had the feeling that you had better not stay for one day longer. It was not always so easy to get out. I had been going to school in England, but when the Germans marched into the Rhineland in 1936 I could no longer get a labor permit there and I had to return

to Germany. My parents had left me an apartment house, but my passport was taken away until I could sell the house to an Aryan in order to stay in the country, in Germany, until the house was sold and I could not sell it. [08:00] On the afternoon of November 9th, 1938, I was in Jacoby's, an elegant shoe store on the [Gefurstendam?]. I heard a great commotion in the street outside the store. (crowd sounds) Through the window I could see a horde of young thugs with SS men among them.

They were stamping and yelling and screaming and waving clubs. They moved in on the store and started smashing windows. They pulled out all the shoes and came into the store waving their clubs. We ran out to the street where we saw a mass of people screaming, [*Juden verruckt!*] All Jews must die. We'll murder you. Every Jewish store on the [Gefurstendam?], all of them, were invaded and smashed and glass was all over the boulevard. Around the corner they were burning down a synagogue. [09:00] I ran to a friend's apartment and stayed there. We didn't know what to say to each other. We stayed there, until we heard that the shouting outside died down. I was afraid to return to my apartment, but I picked my way through the rubble in the streets and somehow I got out of the city to the suburb of [Dahlen?] where some friends of mine were living.

They had managed to get their two sons out of Germany and all the way to Australia. Soon they hoped to join them. We sat in their living room listening to the radio from Holland. This was forbidden and if someone had reported us we would all have been arrested. But the house was large and private and the radio was played very low and so we could hear from abroad what was happening at that very moment in Germany. And the announcer said --

Announcer: At this moment all Jewish men between the ages of [10:00] 16 and 70 are being rounded up and sent to concentration camps.

F: I remember then, Mr. Dreyfus got very pale and he stood up. He said he was going to leave because they might come for him at any moment. He wouldn't tell us where he would go. He didn't want us to be interrogated and maybe even tortured into confessing something we knew. "It would be better," he said, "if we didn't know," he went out and got into his car and drove off. We had no idea if we would ever see him again. And then we two women, Mrs. Dreyfus and myself, we sat alone there in that house, waiting for them to come.

Rabbi Brickner: And they did come. An hour later the bell rang. Two Gestapo officers entered and asked Mrs. Dreyfus if her husband was home. She said no, he was away on a business [11:00] trip. They asked if her elder son was home. No, she told them, both sons had left for Australia.

F: They searched the house. Every room, every closet, every corner. When they didn't find anyone there they went away. But others were not so lucky. They were sent to concentration camps. I decided to go back at last to my own apartment in Berlin. There was already a rumor that the next night all Jewish women between 16 and 60 were going to be arrested. I packed a small suitcase and placed it beside me and I sat there by the window of my apartment waiting for a knock at the door. When it came I would jump out of the window into the courtyard. [12:00] I spent the whole night sitting there. I will never forget that night. I knew they would want to arrest me because I knew I had been followed for sometime already. I was in love, you see, with a German sculptor and the Nuremberg laws forbade any mixing between Christians and Jews. "Race shame" they called it.

Someone had given us away to the Gestapo and they had started to watch us. We had no choice but to separate, but still they continued to follow me, so I expected they would come for

me. Well, they never came that night. It was only false rumor. But that is my memory of Crystal Night. It was a night filled with unknown fears and I was at my window ready to jump. [13:00]

GUNTER COM: My name is Gunter [Com?]. I must have slept through the destruction on the night of November 9th. But then, you see, I lived in Burton, a small town. Everyone there knew everyone else. It's harder to attack your neighbor when you know him. My family had lived in Burton for generations. I was known and liked. My father had served in the war and was chairman of the Veterans Association. Until the new law from Berlin barred him for racial reasons. As a matter of fact, he'd been a popular young lawyer in the town. So I slept through Crystal Night. But the next morning I was awakened by the thud of boots in the hallway. [14:00]

I'd been hearing that sound for so long in my dreams, in my nightmares. It was as if in the under-reaches of my thoughts the boots had been marching a long time. But this morning they passed my landing and marched upstairs. (steps and knocking) They'd come to take my neighbor away. I blessed my luck that my wife was visiting a relative in Berlin. (steps) In the next room I heard my baby daughter starting to cry and the boots still pounding on the stairs. I heard them stop again. I heard my neighbor's voice murmuring something and the footsteps return,

coming closer. They were coming to my door. [15:00] They were asking the maid if I was home. It turned out they did not come for me, no. It was just that my neighbor had asked if he could leave the key to his apartment with me, for he didn't know whether he would ever be back.

Then, then one of the Gestapo officers asked if I was a Jew. If so, they were going to take me with them. They did, too. They told me to get my coat and follow them. I spent one month at Buchenwald. Only when my wife managed to arrange for a ship to take us to Shanghai, the only place that didn't require a visa for refugees in those days, was I released. I never went back to the apartment. [16:00] They sent the maid and my baby daughter to prison. They made a shambles of the apartment. When my wife came back she was able to obtain the release of the child. She also filled 16 buckets with broken china. All our furniture was destroyed and all our paintings punched full of holes. We threw it all out. It didn't matter. We escaped.

Rabbi Brickner: The destruction and murder were not the end of the price the Jews of Germany were expected to pay for the murder of vom Rath. Crystal Night was only a warning. The extermination of Jews systematically, sadistically, was only heralded by the 20th century pogrom, the beginning of the long

forced march to the gas chambers of Majdanek and Buchenwald. The thousands of Jews were rescued [17:00] from Germany then. Thousands more were snatched from death in the years that followed, that a million refugees from Hitlerism and other forms of oppression in our age managed to reach the shores of Israel and other free lands and start new lives. This only happened because in far off America there were other Jews who cared and who gave millions to the United Jewish Appeal for rescue, relief and rehabilitation of the dispossessed and the persecuted.

And no so many decades since the Nazi Party called the "Week of Broken Glass" and what Jews call "Crystal Night", one looks back and wonders whether the Week of Broken Glass was actually the beginning of an era of genocide in an even larger sense. Crystal Night perhaps was the beginning of the brutalization of the entire human race. Here is what the poet Denis Levertov wrote of it. [18:00]

F: From blacked out streets, wide avenues swept by curfew, alleyways, veins of dark within dark, from houses whose walls had for a long time known the tense stretch of skin over bone, as their brick or stone glistened. The scream. The awaited scream rises. The shattering of glass and the cracking of bone. A Pole lot tumult as when black ice bones, knives if ice and

glass splitting and splintering the silence into enumerable screaming needles of yes, now it is upon us, the jack boots are running in spurts of sudden blood light through the broken temples. The veils are intertwined. Terror has a white [19:00] sound. Every scream of fear is a white needle freezing the eyes.

The floodlights of their trucks throw jets of white. Their shouts cleave the wholeness of darkness into sectors of transparent white-clouded pantomime where all that was awaited is happening. It is Crystal Night. It is Crystal Night. These spikes, which are not pitched in the range of common hearing, whistle through time, smashing the windows of sleep and dream, smashing the windows of history, a whiteness scattering and hailstones, each a mirror for man's eyes. [20:00]

Rabbi Brickner: Is it still Crystal Night?

Announcer: You have been listening to the latest in our weekly award-winning series *Adventures in Judaism*, brought to you by this station in cooperation with the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the central congregational body of Reform Judaism. Today's program was *Crystal Night*, with Vivian Nathan, Sorrell Booke and James Sloan. We wish to thank the New Directions Publishing Corporation for permission to broadcast

Denis Levertov's poem *Crystal Night*. Your host has been Rabbi Balfour Brickner. *Adventures in Judaism* is written, directed and produced by Paul [Kresch?]. Tune in next week at this time for another *Adventure in Judaism*. [21:00]

[music - choir, 22:00 - 22:27]

END OF AUDIO FILE [22:27]

