

Jacob Comes Home, Kristallnacht and Jews in Nazi Germany

In 1939 a drama in one act, *Jacob Comes Home* by William Kozlenko was acclaimed by John Gassner, of the Theatre Guild, as "the most moving short anti-nazi play" he had yet read. Playwright Stanley Young called it "a dramatic masterpiece." What was the setting of this brief play? What was going on in the world and why was it written?

The Jews in Germany suffered appallingly after the Nazi party came to power in 1932. Some rich Jews could afford to leave Adolph Hitler's Germany (or were forced to) but many could not. Thugs in the SS, Hitler's security forces, were given a free hand in their treatment of the Jews.



Hitler had made plain his hate for Jews in his autobiography "Mein Kampf". References to the "filthy Jew" litter the book. He blamed Jews for both the defeat of Germany in World War I and the harsh terms of the Treaty of Versailles at the end of the war. In fact Hitler blamed the Jews for every social ill facing the German people. In one section, Hitler wrote:

"Was there any form of filth or crime...without at least one Jew involved in it? If you cut even cautiously into such a sore, you find a Jew like a maggot in a rotting body..."

In 1920, Hitler announced to the very small Nazi Party the Five Points of national Socialism. One of these stated:

"None but members of the nation may be citizens of the State. None but those of German blood may be members of the nation. No Jew, therefore, may be a member of the nation."

Early on in his political career, Hitler continued with his anti-Semitism, a name for the hatred of Jewish people. In a speech given in Munich in July 1922 he said:

"...Jews are a people of robbers. The Jew has never founded any civilization, though he has destroyed civilizations by the hundred...everything he has stolen. Foreign people, foreign workmen build him his temples, it is foreigners who create and work for him, it is foreigners who shed their blood for him."

During the 1920s when Germany seemed to be recovering, what Hitler said about the Jews was listened to by only the few. After the 1929 Depression, though, when people became unemployed and all looked helpless, Hitler's scapegoating proved more willingly accepted. The Nazi party gained seats in the German parliament and Hitler became chancellor. Once in power, Hitler used his position to launch a campaign against the Jews that culminated in the Holocaust.

After January 1933, the Jews became the "Untermenschen" - the sub-humans. Nazi thugs stopped Germans from shopping



in Jewish shops. By 1934, all Jewish shops were marked with the yellow Star of David or had the word "Juden" written on the window. SS men stood outside the shops to deter anyone from entering. This was an attempt to economically bankrupt Jewish men and women and destroy what they had spent years building up.

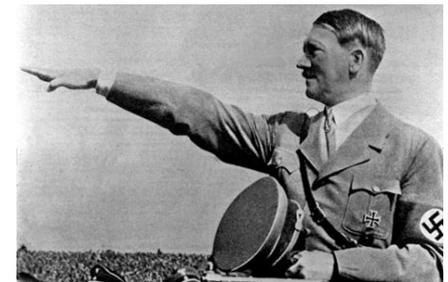
On buses, trains and park benches, Jews had to sit on seats marked for them. Children at schools were taught specifically anti-Semitic ideas. Jewish school children were openly ridiculed by teachers and the bullying of Jews in the playground by other pupils went unpunished. If the Jewish children responded by not wanting to go to school, then that served a purpose in itself and it also gave the Nazis a reason to peddle the lie that Jewish children were inherently lazy and could not be bothered to go to school.

In 1935, the Nuremberg Laws were passed. The Jews lost their right to be German citizens and marriage between Jews and non-Jews was forbidden. It was after this law that the violence against the Jew really openly started. Those that could pay a fine were allowed to leave the country. Many could not and many shops refused to sell food or medicine to those who remained. All Jews were required to carry identification cards, so everyone would know they were Jews. Eventually all Jews were required to wear a yellow Star of David badge on their clothing.



The campaign against the Jews stopped for a short duration during the Berlin Olympics in 1936 - but once the overseas press had gone, it started up again.

By 1938, German tanks had rolled into Austria and a region of Central Europe called the Sudetenland forming what Hitler called the "Third Reich." Germany had built itself a massive army, navy, and air force and was making no secret of its ambitions to use those weapons. Meanwhile the Nazi government was at a height of popular support. New construction projects had put men back to work. Factories were running at full capacity producing both consumer goods and weapons of war, and modern conveniences like Volkswagen automobiles were available to the working public for the first time.





The situation for Jewish people, however, was even worse than it had been before. Jews were viewed with suspicions and, in many cases, outright disgust. It reached a pre-war peak in 1938 with Krystalnacht - "The Night of the Broken Glass".

In November 1938, a Nazi 'diplomat' was shot dead by a Jew in Paris. Hitler ordered a seven day campaign of terror against the Jews in Germany to be organized by the SS.

On November 10, the campaign started. 10,000 shops owned by Jews were destroyed and their contents stolen. Countless homes and more than 900 synagogues, Jewish places of worship, were set on fire and left to burn. The fire brigades showed their loyalty to Hitler by assuming that the buildings

would burn down anyway, so why try to prevent it? A huge amount of damage was done to Jewish property but the Jewish community was ordered to pay a one billion mark fine. Jews were forced to scrub the streets clean. The only arrests made were the arrests of some 30,000 Jewish leaders.

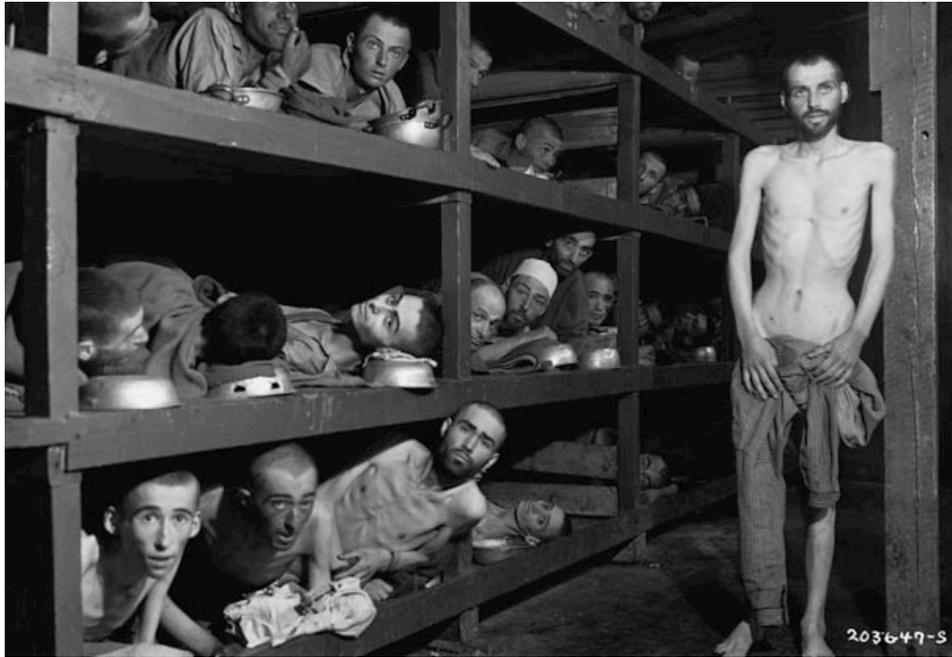
"Kristallnacht" provided the Nazi government with an opportunity at last to totally remove Jews from German public life. Within a week, the Nazis declared that Jewish businesses could not be reopened, Jewish children were barred from attending school, and Jews were prohibited from selling goods or services anywhere, from engaging in crafts work, from serving as the managers of any firms, or from being members of cooperatives.



"Jacob Comes Home" was written by William Kozlenko in 1938 shortly after the events of Krystalnacht. It was first performed in early 1939 at Northwestern College in Illinois. As a member of an immigrant family, he believed that Americans were by in large unaware of the events occurring an ocean away. And even if they were aware, they had only read the facts, not felt the emotions of these people whose lives were being torn apart and destroyed. Kozlenko felt that Americans needed to act to help Europe's Jews by allowing more to immigrate to the U.S. and by pressuring their government to take action against Germany.

The Second World War began in September of 1939 when German troops invaded Poland. The chaos of war gave Hitler even more freedom to bring death and destruction to Jewish communities throughout Europe. By the war's end more than 6 million Jews had been systematically murdered in Nazi concentration camps. A time now called the Holocaust.





Some Germans actively supported these Nazi actions. For others fear made them turn a blind eye. A British writer living in Germany witnessed the arrest of a Jew in a cafe where everybody simply looked away - to object would have provoked a violent response from the SS. The fear of the concentration camps was such that most felt compelled to remain silent despite the fact that they did not approve of what was going on.

Some Christians did speak up and several lost their lives as a result. Martin Niemoeller and Dietrich Bonhoffer were Christian pastors in Germany when the Nazis came to power. In 1934 Hitler placed Germany's churches under the control of the government and began to replace the message of Christ's love and forgiveness with Nazi hate propaganda. Niemoeller and Bonhoffer formed the Pastors' Emergency League and began to preach against Hitler.

Bonhoffer wrote *The Cost of Discipleship* calling on Christians to take action in the name of faith. He was arrested after conducting a worship service in April 1943 and imprisoned in a concentration camp. He was hanged two years later. His final words were *"This is the end; for me, the beginning of life."*

Niemoeller was arrested in 1937. He was tried, sentenced to seven months in prison, and fined. After his release, he continued to publicly oppose Hitler's policies. He was arrested again and spent the next seven years in concentration camps. He was liberated by allied troops at the end of the war in 1945. Niemoeller became famous for this quote regarding his early silence as the Nazi party rose to power:

"First they came for the Communists, but I was not a Communist so I did not speak out. Then they came for the Socialists and the Trade Unionists, but I was neither, so I did not speak out. Then they came for the Jews, but I was not a Jew so I did not speak out. And when they came for me, there was no one left to speak out for me."

Set from a stage production of *When Jacob Comes Home*



Article adapted from: http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/Jews_Nazi_Germany.htm