

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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The Fire-worshippers
And the Silent Burghers

Plockstrasse 8
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Dear Mr. Rogers:

Today there is a bare spot in the conscience of nearly every Giessener who is thirty or older. That spot is a parking lot opposite the Stadttheater on the Berlinerplatz. A lawn borders it on one side, and a shabby wartime barracks on the other. The lot itself is usually empty. Two decades ago, it was the place where the synagogue of the Israel Society stood.

Early on a November morning in 1938, the temple began to burn. Nobody knew what was happening. And then again, everyone knew.

The Fire Department hurried to the scene from its station at The Brandplatz, a few blocks away. In a short time, the blaze was extinguished. There was much coming and going of firemen, police, Gestapo officials, and Party leaders. Unaccountably, the fire broke out again after an hour. Simultaneously, another blaze started in the orthodox synagogue on the Steinstrasse. Both buildings burned to hollow shells.

Twenty years later, we are thoroughly informed about the infamous Nazi assaults on the Jewish synagogues during the Kristallnacht. We know that the Nazis sought a proper revenge for the murder of their legation councillor, Ernst vom Rath, by a young Polish Jew. Herszel Grynszpan shot vom Rath on November 7, 1938 in Paris. ("The Nazi press declared this was a further proof of the Jewish "World Conspiracy".)

We know that Goebbels planned the "spontaneous" popular reprisals for this assassination. Orders flashed to every Storm Troop unit in the Reich: burn and demolish Jewish synagogues and stores. At the same time, orders were sent to all "Stapo" stations telling the secret police not to interfere in the "actions". The police were to "prevent plundering...confiscate important archive material...prepare to arrest 20-30,000 Jews, above all wealthy Jews..." This was to be the last "great task" of the S.A. brownshirts, who had been forced to lie doggo after the Röhm Putsch in 1934.

We know that about 250 synagogues were burned or demolished by the S.A. Standarten during the night and morning of November 9-10; that over 500 stores were set afire, 170 houses, 11 community houses. We know that several dozen Jews were shot down in the streets, that another 20,000 were arrested. We know that the damages cost several million marks, and that Germany's Jews had to pay for them as "atonement".

But we don't know much about what the Kristallnacht looked like in an individual town. In the case of Giessen, for instance, not a single person was punished for the burning of the local synagogues. Sure, there was a trial after the war. But evidence was insufficient for any convictions.

Those Nazi arsonists who are still living - and there are many of them - gather at their Stammtische on a weekday evening just like anyone else - with one exception: they don't chum up with their old Nazi cronies the way they did in Hitler's day. Nor do you hear them talk about the good old days. They compose the last chapter of this gruesome Whodunnit. A chapter that, in the case of Giessen, will probably never be written.

Still, it is possible to piece together something of the synagogue fire story.

About midnight, radio transmitters and teleprinters began chattering orders from the North Hessian city of Kassel to the various Storm Troop and Gestapo bureaus throughout "Hessengau" - burn the synagogues, keep an eye peeled to prevent excesses. In Giessen, the S.A. leaders were notified that they were to set fire to the synagogue in the nearby village of Reiskirchen. The Reiskirchen Storm Troopers were to come to Giessen, and help do the same. Meanwhile, the local party chief, Kreisleiter Backhaus, was informed of the plans. Gas cans were filled, trucks loaded with a handful of Nazi toughs.

In the dark of the wintry morning, three men went to the house of Albert Schädlich, janitor of the Israel Synagogue. Frau Schädlich, a round little woman, sleepily answered the doorbell. "There were three forms in the doorway," she recalls, "one with a slouched hat I think was Backhaus. He asked if there was going to be a service that morning. I told him no. I knew there was something wrong."

Frau Schädlich found her husband shaving. She told him her suspicions. Albert Schädlich dressed hastily and hurried to the synagogue. As he arrived he saw three shadowy figures jump over the wall beside the building. Immediately, he spotted a window which had been forced open on the north side of the synagogue. From inside he heard a crackling sound. At 6:15 a.m. he called the fire department.

Apparently, Giessen's Fire Department was not acquainted with the Nazi schemes and expectations. They rushed to the Sudanlage where they found smoke pouring out of the synagogue. Inside a fire was blazing behind the altar. They fought the flames efficiently and quickly, at the same time removing carpets and other valuables to the Jewish Community House nearby. By 7:30 the fire was out.

In the meantime, officers of Giessen's Criminal Police had arrived on the scene, accompanied by several Gestapo men. One of the Kripo officers, Rienhardt, took Schädlich aside, "Albert,"

he whispered, "if you have something here, then pack it up and get yourself away. We have nothing more to say here. The S.S. and S.A. have everything in hand..."

However, Schädlich sneaked back into the synagogue at 8 a.m. and looked around. To his horror, he found gasoline and kindling had been set up in several new spots in the loft. They had been prepared by the Brownshirts and Blackshirts of the S.A. and S.S.

An hour later, the synagogue began to burn again. This time the flames took a better hold. Gestapo and S.S. men milled around outside the building. The firemen appeared to renew their efforts to quench the blaze, but somehow, no water came out of the hoses.

Kreisleiter Backhaus, who had put himself in charge of these clumsy arson operations, was heard to say to Giessen public buildings authority, Herr Gravert, "The fire won't be put out: only the water damage will be regulated."

Simultaneous with the new outbreak in the Sudanlage synagogue, The S.A. and S.S. incendiaries were busy at the orthodox synagogue in the Steinstrasse. Three men in civilian clothes were seen climbing in a side window with a can of gasoline. Around at the front, a dozen S.A. men, partly in uniform, broke in the door. A schoolboy, Gerd Becker who was then eight, said he saw the furnaceman from his school leap the fence into the synagogue courtyard and help break in the door. This was Friedrich Engel, a 38-year-old S.A. squadron leader.

Only a few minutes earlier, Jews had finished their last morning prayers in the synagogue. The wife of the janitor, Maggie Deeg, had warned them that the liberal synagogue was already ablaze and that they must escape through a basement exit.

While the Brownshirts splashed gasoline around the synagogue pews, an S.S. man, Rehberg was seen outside smashing the building's windows with a cane. Another well-known Giessen Nazi, the forest ranger, Georg Emmert, was seen running into the building with more gasoline. Inside, he helped chop up the organ with an ax and pulled down the chandeliers.

Georg Hammel, a young salesman who was also active in the S.A., raised a ladder up against the synagogue. He climbed up and disappeared into the top floor of the building for a few minutes. Two other men attempted to pull down the Star of David from the roof.

At 9:30, the first clouds of smoke began to puff out of the orthodox synagogue. But the fire caught slowly. A fire truck appeared. Georg Deeg, the 50-year-old janitor tried to enter the building. He was pushed back by S.A. men. Deeg pleaded with Fire Chief Lenz to be allowed to rescue his belongings. "What?" shouted Lenz, "you damned Jew-slave, you still have furniture in there? I'll stamp it into ashes for you." He kicked Deeg in the kidney.

The Nazi officials gathered outside the synagogue to watch the effects of their handiwork. However, the flames refused to spread rapidly. Hans Bay, a young reporter from the local newspaper and an ardent Nazi, joined the group. "It's going rather badly here," he said, "in the Sudanlage, everything is blazing. Apparently it wasn't well enough prepared."

Firemen entered the synagogue several times as if to make perfunctory efforts at extinguishing the flickering flames. In reality, no water was sprayed on the synagogue at all, but only on neighboring buildings.

Large crowds had gathered around the two synagogues. Police kept them at a distance. By 10 o'clock the fires took a lethal grip on both buildings with their flaming fingers.

It's strange to hear now what Giesseners did during the synagogue holocausts. Many stayed passively in their homes. The criminal police officer, Karl Seng, (DB - 23) fled into the Krofdorf forest so that he wouldn't be involved in any unpleasant assignments. But there were others who behaved differently.

Wilhelm Simmer, a janitor, and Adolf Dörr, a tinsmith, both about 30 years old, ran over to a Jewish-owned textile shop in the Neustadt and smashed the windows. Dörr climbed on the shoulders of two youngsters and ripped down the sign above the door. Simmer and some others threw heaps of wares out into the street. A policeman caught them and made them replace the goods. Just then, two Gestapo officers arrested the store owner, Karl Zwang.

At the same time, Hitler Youth members from the trade school swarmed out to raid other Jewish businesses. They attacked Fritz Kessler, the butcher, and others. Police did their best to restrain the looters, but they were too few. A band of S.S. and S.A. men stormed into the bank of Moritz Herz on the Schulstrasse and helped themselves to whatever money they could find.

It took a squad of armed Gestapo men to drive off the raiders. The assault on Herz's Bankhaus took place right in front of the Gestapo headquarters. Excited Storm Troopers stoned the secret police and screamed insults at them: "You filthy Jew-slaves!"

Giessen's police had their hands full on that November day. They had been receiving contradictory orders for nearly 20 hours. At one point, Major Johann Heinacker of the Schutzpolizei had sent out officers to protect every Jewish home and business. His order was later countermanded, and finally reinstated. Heinacker, who was known to be unsympathetic to the Nazis, was fired soon afterwards. So was Herr Hofmann, the Gestapo chief.

While the synagogue embers smouldered, the Gestapo rounded up 150 Jewish men, some were beaten and trampled, then they were piled into three buses. They were driven to Buchenwald concentration camp and kept there for several months. At the same time, the city carpenter was sent around to board up the demolished Jewish stores.

A few days later, orders came from Joseph Goebbels to raze the burnt out synagogues to the ground. The Giessen authorities tried to do so with explosives, but that failed. A month later, demolition crews ripped down the walls and carted off the rubble.

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Nine years after the synagogue fires, a trial was begun in Giessen's County Courthouse. Five men were prosecuted on breach of peace charges in connection with the fires. After months of hearings, all five were acquitted for lack of evidence. They were Adolf Dörr, Wilhelm Simmer, Georg Hammel, Hans Bay, and Gustav "Scum" Frey. The last-named was Sturmführer of the Giessen S.A., and he had been seen loitering in the entrance of the Sudanlage synagogue before the fire broke out. With the exception of Bay, all the men are now living and working in Giessen.

Of the five, only Frey was a ringleader in 1938. Kreisleiter Backhaus committed suicide in 1945. The S. A. man, Emmert, and the S.S. man, Rehberg, had been killed at the front. The Gestapo leaders were dead or vanished. As for the other looters and arsonists, some were called before the court, but none were charged.

Was this a miscarriage of justice? Hardly so. It was more a deliberate shoulder'-shrugging evasion of justice. Anyone who examines the fragile scraps of evidence produced at the synagogue trial would have to concede that they don't add up to a single conviction. A shroud of taciturnity as thick as any Lahn Valley fog sealed off all access to the truth. Even the five defendants could get away with their flimsy alibis. There was nobody to contradict them. How can one do justice to criminals when that very justice had been in the hands of the criminals?

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Giessen's synagogues were burned down in broad daylight. Stores and banks were looted. The culprits acted before the eyes of their neighbors.

What was the general reaction to this Nazi assault?

Shock, abhorrence, shame...and silence. Hands-in-the-pockets, tight-lipped, turn-the-head-the-other-way silence.

Order is dear to the Germans. Disorder makes them anxious. Private property is precious to the Germans. They like to build walls and fences around their possessions, or maybe keep a trusty police dog around. Trespassing is not only forbidden. It is unthinkable.

Yet all of a sudden, a gang of toughs, made up of neighbors, had set upon the property of other neighbors and demolished it. Their own police stood by and let it happen. Their own firemen permitted two buildings to burn down in front of them.

(At the trial, one fireman testified snakily: "In my opinion, the extinguishing work at Sudanlage synagogue was not properly carried out...one could say sabotaged. The building could have been saved otherwise." Concerning the other synagogue, another fireman testified: "It could still have been saved, since it was burning mainly around the benches.")

Of course the property belonged to Jews. But they had gone to school with these Jews, eaten Matzoth with them during the high holidays (so I have been told by at least a dozen Giessen gentiles), sat in tabernacles with them, swam in the Volksbad with them... Besides, it was private property.

There were the Nazi fanatics - the Party bigshots, and the youngsters who had been caught by the Hitler Youth. But they were in the minority. Giessen was still a city of burghers; well-settled, many of them wealthy.

So the reaction was of queasiness. When you ask them today about the synagogue fires they breathe deeply and say: "Infamy!" "A crime against civilization!" and "I was never so ashamed to be a German in my life." I think they mean it.

I asked Frau Bauermeister why so many Germans took the Kristallnacht events so seriously - seemingly much more so than the annihilation of millions of Jews in the concentration camps. She replied: "It was the first and the worst excess of the Nazis for many, because they had swallowed all the 'idealism' of the movement. All at once this idealism was shown to be nothing in a practical sense but destruction of Jewish possessions. All the time, the Nazis had been urging everyone to save, to conserve things, and then they said 'destroy!' It was a crass incongruity. Also, this was something they saw with the naked eye. Most of them never saw a concentration camp."

One day I asked the City's "Cultural Councillor" to tell me what he could about Giessen's Jews. Heinrich Bitsch is a tall bespectacled man whose bald pate is surrounded by a fringe of tasseled hair - like a Victorian lampshade. His wife is of partly Jewish descent. Herr Bitsch wasn't able to tell me much. But among other things he said: "Outwardly, the actions against the Jews were finished with the burning of the synagogues."



An empty lot...

It is a certainty to me that six years of war, and 14 years of peace have not been able to wipe out the memory of that November morning in 1938 for those Giesseners who witnessed it, whether they were among the fire worshippers or the silent burghers.

There is a bare spot to remind them.

David Binder

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