

# Dark night for Jews and Christians

By Teresa Pirola

*Kristallnacht* is the name given to the night of 9 November 1938, when a Nazi-inspired violent rampage in Germany and Austria resulted in the widespread destruction of Jewish businesses, synagogues, sacred books and human lives. *Kristallnacht* is generally viewed as a critical step in the movement of Nazi policy towards the ‘Final Solution.’ One Holocaust survivor, a child in Munich at the time, recalls it in these words:

That night our synagogue went up in flames. Jews who were attempting to rescue Sifrei Torah [Torah scrolls] were kept away by the police. Fire fighters were on the scene. Their job was to make sure that the flames did not spread to Aryan property. On the morning of November 10th I remember seeing scores of Jewish shops burnt and plundered. While my brother and I were on the way to our classes the main streets were littered with glass, hence the name *Kristallnacht* [Night of Broken Glass].<sup>1</sup>

For most of my Catholic life the anniversary of *Kristallnacht* came and went unnoticed. On occasions I registered its occurrence, but it took its place in my consciousness as one of many human tragedies in history with no direct relevance to me. After all, I am not Jewish, I am not German, I was born in a time and place remote from the events of that fateful night, and there is plenty of human suffering in our 21<sup>st</sup> century world to occupy my prayer life.

But these days the memory of *Kristallnacht* strikes a deep chord in my heart, and specifically in my Catholic Christian heart, for reasons which I would like to share with you.

Every human suffering should be the concern of the Christian. Yet *Kristallnacht* has added significance in that it involved the sufferings of our spiritual kin. The foundations of the Church are in Judaism. We would not have Christianity—we would not have Jesus or Mary or the apostles—were it not for the Jewish people: their faith traditions, prophets, liturgical

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Dr Pesach Schindler, “A Jewish Child Growing Up in Nazi Germany” (Jerusalem, 2004), archived at Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial, Israel.

rhythms and scriptures. Christians are linked to Jews by way of an historical/biblical/spiritual umbilical cord which can never be completely severed.

Nor is this connection simply a matter of historical background. To this day, the Jewish people offer a unique and irreplaceable witness to the name of God in the world. No one can usurp their role in the story of salvation. “God holds the Jews most dear” (*Nostra Aetate*, 4);<sup>2</sup> they are the original bearers of the covenant, a covenant “never revoked by God” (John Paul II, Mainz, 1980).

And in the face of all this, what did Hitler’s regime, heralded by the events of *Kristallnacht*, set out to achieve? A diabolical goal. For the systematic annihilation of Jews effectively amounted to an attempt to eradicate the name of God in the world. When Nazism targeted the Jewish people it attacked God’s chosen people, and the very roots of the Church.

There is another dark reason why *Kristallnacht* calls for my attention. Hitler’s rise to power occurred in Christian Europe. One of the cultural factors that allowed Nazi propaganda against the Jews to flourish was the existence of deeply entrenched anti-Semitic stereotypes, including views that portrayed Jews as rejected by God, stripped of their covenantal blessing due to their role in Jesus’ death. Such ideas had infiltrated Christianity for centuries, had infected the views of popes, saints, theologians and accommodated active persecution of Jewish communities. With this as its backdrop, the Shoah takes its place in history not only as a tragic chapter for the Jewish people but as one of the darkest chapters in the history of Christianity. The heroic actions of those Christians who number among the ‘righteous Gentiles’ contrast with the silence of most Christian communities as Jews in their midst were progressively marginalized and eventually subjected to mass murder.

To sum up, the memory of *Kristallnacht* confronts Christians with an historic moment of diabolic contradiction: a moment when a widely-held distortion in Christian thought and

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<sup>2</sup> “God holds the Jews most dear for the sake of their Fathers; he does not repent of the gifts he makes or of the calls he issues—such is the witness of the Apostle [Rom. 11:28-29]” (Vatican II: *Nostra Aetate*, 4).

culture contributed to a path that led to the murder of six million Jews, the race of which Jesus was a son; a path which ultimately sought the destruction of the people of the covenant and the deepest memory of the church.

The horror of all this is almost too great to process. To face such demons takes moral courage and unshakeable confidence in the mercy of God and the transformative power of the Holy Spirit. “Do not be afraid” is the repeated message of Scripture. Thankfully, in recent decades we have had church leaders—including bishops, popes and theologians—who have not been afraid to move decisively in this area. Beginning with Vatican II we have seen a dramatic shift in the teaching of the Catholic Church, calling for its members to embrace a profound appreciation of Judaism and to repent of a conflicted history. This latter point was poignantly captured in the image of Pope John Paul II praying at the Western Wall in 2000. In the Year of the Great Jubilee, before the eyes of the world and at the Jews’ holiest site, the Pope sought forgiveness for the sins of Christians against ‘the people of the covenant.’ Still, despite historic steps forward, much of this new awareness remains at the level of bishops, academia and interfaith dialogue groups. It has yet to filter down to the grassroots arena. Where blatant anti-Semitism is no longer a threat, indifference often takes its place.

For all these reasons, *Kristallnacht* today finds a place in my Catholic Christian consciousness. Certainly, Christian participation in local remembrance services organized by Jewish communities and interfaith groups is to be encouraged.<sup>3</sup> There is also an important role for *Kristallnacht* remembrance in Christian homes and parishes: a prayer at the meal table, an acknowledgement in liturgies and other gatherings of the day. I deliberately suggest *Kristallnacht* as the focus of this remembrance because it highlights a specific moment in history when *there was still time* for Christians to speak up against injustice; a moment that

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<sup>3</sup> For information about *Kristallnacht* memorial services, visit the website of the Australian Council of Christians and Jews [www.ccj.org.au](http://www.ccj.org.au) or enquire at your local synagogue or diocesan interfaith office.

passed too silently, with dire consequences.<sup>4</sup> The urgency of gospel witness is underscored. That we must join with the Jewish people in saying “never again” is plain. But memories fade and future generations will claim amnesia. Annual Christian remembrance of *Kristallnacht*, accompanied by a collective resolve to resist evil, will serve as a healing influence for generations to come.

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<sup>4</sup> A notable exception in Australia was that of William Cooper, an indigenous Australian who led a Melbourne protest march against the mistreatment of Jews in Germany following Kristallnacht in 1938. Cooper was honoured at Israel’s Holocaust Memorial, Yad Vashem in December 2010. See: <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/news.aspx/138896>