

History lesson

11/9/88



Fifty years ago tonight the Nazis shoved in the world's face their intention to rid their domains of all Jews.

Striking at their favored time, the last hours before dawn, when the November sky was its darkest, S.S. bullies and party functionaries burned and looted synagogues, stores and homes in Germany and the recently annexed Austria.

Men, women and children attempting to escape were shot down as they ran. Not in wholesale numbers and not in every instance. But the enormity of the atrocity was no less because its victims numbered only in the hundreds.

Nazi official records estimated that 20,000 Jews were arrested in the orgy of hate which the Germans called *Kristallnacht* (Crystal Night) because of the shattered glass that blanketed the streets.

Contrary to recently published reports, November 9, 1938, was not the start of what turned out to be the Holocaust, when 12 million human beings — half of them Jews — were executed in the death camps.

In the beginning were the words in the Nazi fuhrer's *Mein Kampf*, written 15 years before, when Hitler spelled out his plan for the "racial cleansing" of Germany. Those 1923 words were then ignored, dismissed as the demagogic rantings of a petty politician prepared to say anything to gain power.

After all, it had been nearly 400 years since any Western European nation had called for religious purification among its people. Not since 1492, when Inquisition Spain summoned Muslims and Jews to recant their faiths under threat of torture and burning at the stake, had any "Christian people" sought the total elimination of non-conforming believers from their midst.

Even German Jews dismissed Hitler's racism as a medieval anachronism, at first. Their loyalty to the Fatherland was proven, beyond doubt, when although only 10 percent of the population, they received 15 percent of the Iron Crosses awarded for valor by Kaiser Wilhelm's Imperial Army. Before 1930, they brought the glory of 10 Nobel science laureates to their homeland.

With their bravery and their brains, the nation's Jews had paid for the right to call themselves "good Germans."

Indeed, there was little immediate impact on their lives when the rabble-rousing ex-corporal took over the reins of government from the fatherly hero, Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, who had pinned medals on Jewish chests.

Only in retrospect is it possible to make any case that Hitler began his persecution of the Jews during his initial months in power. In fact, he prepared his succession by ordering the slaughter of deviants within his own ranks. On June 30, 1934 — "The Night of the Long Knives" — the chief victims were Storm Troopers who had been the biggest racists. Their elimination seemed a sign the fuhrer had turned his back on extremism.

Similarly, the first concentration camp prisoners were "enemies of the state." Mostly communists, socialists and opposition politicians, their religious preferences, if any, were secondary. However, among the inmates were clergy and lay leaders — from all faiths — whose independence was considered disruptive to the Nazis' drive for totalitarian unity.

Moreover, during Hitler's first two

years at the head of Germany, violent actions and more violent threats against Jews were officially deplored, when publicly protested. In some instances, apologies were offered and restitution paid. The violence continued, nevertheless, but attributed to individuals' mistaken zeal.

Incredible as it may now seem, good Germans, including some Jews, argued that their new government should be given the opportunity to prove its promises of a peace-loving Germany, a strong friend to Europe and all mankind.

While all the world remembers *Kristallnacht*, 50 years ago this Wednesday, the date that must be carved in infamy was the day Hitler's printed diatribes were transformed into the so-called Nuremberg Laws.

On September 15, 1935, German Jews lost all their rights as citizens, even those who had earned the rights with their blood on the nation's battlefields. But the laws' first impact was more restrictive, than punitive. Their lives shrank, but they still lived.

In the three years before the synagogues flamed against the November early morning sky, the world pandered to the Nazis' deprivation of humanity from German Jews on the theory that their fate was "an internal affair." In practice, the international community appeared to give its approval by flocking to Berlin for the 1936 Olympics.

Furthermore, the games were simply another attraction for the swarms of tourists who continued to visit Hitler's Germany, praising Nazi efficiency and cleanliness. Only a few brave voices were raised to protest the regime's savaging of human rights.

During those three years, while the world remained mainly silent, additional decrees reduced Jews in Germany, Austria and conquered Czechoslovakia to virtual sub-human status with the objective of forcing them to leave.

To speed the new exodus along, the Nazis crammed men and women, children and babies into box-cars and shipped them across borders. Tens of thousands landed in Poland where a few years later they were herded into gas ovens by the same Nazis.

However, complete extermination of all the world's Jews did not become official policy until early wartime successes fostered the illusion in Hitler's depraved mind that he would, indeed, conquer the world.

Fifty years ago, on a night when German and Austrian streets filled up with broken glass, the Holocaust could have been prevented. It was still not too late, if only because it had not yet happened. But too many decent men and women refused to speak up.

Today, in this different world, because I remember history, I have great fear for a different people.

I must speak out for the human rights of these other men, women and children who suffer because their religion is different from their rulers. Palestinian homes and temples are being bulldozed down. They are dying. Their conquerors talk of transporting them from their native land. Therefore, the Palestinians are fighting back.

I cannot approve the shedding of blood whatever the reason.

But this much is very clear: The Holocaust's "Never again!" has no meaning if it doesn't apply to all mankind.