Remembering Kristallnacht After 7 October

The postponement of the annual Kristallnacht Commemorative Concert in Wellington and Auckland tells us something about what it means to commemorate the Holocaust at this time. It is a time in which two complementary tasks are more urgent and more fraught than ever: on the one hand, we to protect the memory of the Holocaust from appropriation, exploitation, denial, and from efforts to relativise, subvert or politicise its meanings, whatever their point of origin; on the other hand, we need to ensure that memory is not sterile but able to illuminate patterns of discrimination, new threats, and empower us to act against them.

That's why when the concert had to be postponed, there was never a question of not marking this day, and why as soon as that decision was made it made sense to gather, consider and study the events and the people we have come to remember.

You will be familiar with the facts:
On 9 and 10 November 85 years ago, the National-Socialist government of Germany organised a systematic series of assaults on the Jewish communities of Germany, newly annexed Austria, and the occupied Czech lands in the Sudetenland, killing 91, arresting 30,000 and deporting them to Buchenwald, Dachau and Sachsenhausen, setting fire to 1,400 synagogues – the very history of German-speaking Jewry – and of course smashing countless Jewish shops and homes: the shattered windows that now give the event its name, or one of its names.

Coming two months after the international community had once again appeased Hitler at Munich, four months after more than thirty countries at Evian had declared that their borders were shut to Jewish refugees, four months before Germany entered Prague and ten months before the start of WWII, Kristallnacht was a turning point in the history of the Holocaust: it was the day that discrimination against the Jewish population gave way to systematic and violent persecution.

While the Nazi government attempted to justify its antisemitic actions as retribution for the Paris assassination of a German diplomat – Ernst Von Rath – by a young Jewish man, Hershel Grynzspan, the context of Kristallnacht was not short-term retaliation but long-term planning:

- in February 1938, Hitler had mused on the possibility of using pretext to channel antisemitic rage and even invade Czechoslovakia;
- that Summer, his government had closed 200 Jewish-owned banks, banned Jews from a number of professions, and forced all Jews to add the name Israel and Sara to their given names.
- In June 1938, the Munich synagogue was burned down and in August the Nuremberg temple suffered the same fate.
- In the same months, Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen were expanded in anticipation of Jewish prisoners.
- And in the last week of October the Nazis rounded up 18000 Jews of Polish nationality and dumped them across the border, attempting to force a hand of the Polish government who had sought to revoke the citizenship of Poles living abroad if they did not obtain a special visa by the 29th of the month. Stranded as refugees in no man's land – one of many such stories in that period – those Jews lived in makeshift camps on the Polish side of the border, among them the Grynzspans, Hershel's family, who settled in an abandoned boxcar.

In other words, Kristallnacht was the result of a carefully planned antisemitic escalation, a further step in path that started with disenfranchisement and discrimination, and one that already bore many of the hallmarks of what would become the Holocaust.

As ever, and as the history and ethos of the Holocaust Centre of New Zealand remind us, there is no substitute for eye-witness and survivor testimony, and I invite readers to engage with the excerpts of testimonies published by the Shoah Foundation here, at their *IWITNESS* page.

Together, these short clips illuminate the central aspects of the history of Kristallnacht:

1. The shock of the violence on that first night. the lingering symbolic power of the breaking of glass explains the Jewish insistence of using the word Kristallnacht – subverting the mockery and deceit of the Nazis who first used it);
2. the trauma of seeing synagogues burning, and vulnerable people targeted for humiliation – perhaps even more than for beatings and arrests – testimonies from

religious and secular Jews alike remember the synagogues aflame as something that cut to the essence of an atavistic identity;

3. the sense of betrayal at neighbours standing by or worse – joining in. This speaks to the particular condition of German and Austrian Jews, generally well integrated, proud of German culture, patriotic, to some extent certain that behaviours they associated – according to the racist assumptions of those days - with Eastern 'barbarism' could not insinuate themselves in the refined and enlightened civilisations of Western Europe. Many a newspaper in Britain and NZ would repeat the fact that this violence was unheard 'West of the Vistula';
4. The difficulty in communicating, stated both explicitly and implicitly. This is evident in survivors withdrawing from sharing details that might be too upsetting, or worse renew the dehumanisation of victims, even those long gone. 'Beatings' and 'vandalism' stand for much more graphically cruel and horrific behaviours – survivors are unlikely to tell us , for instance, that the Nazis in Leipzig targeted the Jewish cemetery, leaving bones strewn across the ground.

It's all there, together with what Dori Laub calls the 'imperative to tell': the idea that many survivors survived in order to tell their story, and then told their story in order to survive.

The significance of Kristallnacht is therefore not only in its strategic role as a 'turning point', but in its encapsulating many of the experiences, processes and forces that define the Holocaust as a historical event.

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The extent and nature of the events were immediately evident to overseas observers. In the US, in Britain, in France, in the Netherlands, in many other free countries, and even in Stalin's Soviet Union, the response was a swift and largely well-informed condemnation, although in most cases public opinion believed that these were riots, not necessarily a campaign.

One brief and unsigned article in the *Auckland Star* stood out for its insight in seeing through the veneer of spontaneous popular rage:

"The violence and the widespread magnitude of the pogrom in Germany are only in a minor degree attributable to the anger caused by the assassination of Dr. von Rath by a Jewish youth in Paris. They are attributable rather to years of continuous propaganda, encouraged and sponsored by the Nazi Government, propaganda in which even children are stirred to hate the Jews, to incite their own parents to extirpate the Jews altogether."

The author continued to sound a word of warning over the complacency of liberal democracies:

"Nor should it be imagined that only the Jews can or will in the future be the victims of wanton and cowardly assaults of this nature. In the totalitarian State, which demands the absolute subordination of the individual, any group of people—whether distinguished' by race, or religion or political belief— may be victimised if for any reason their influence is inconvenient to the Government."

In many instances, the response was more mixed – in France and in parts the US antisemitism reared its head. The widespread sympathy for the plight of German and Austrian Jews also did not significantly alter the hostile immigration rules of most of the world, though Jewish community efforts secured some concessions in the UK, in Australia and elsewhere over the next 12 months.

The Nazi regime portrayed the actions of 9 and 10 November as "spontaneous national rage", yet Kristallnacht was in fact a series of coordinated *pogroms*, certainly reminiscent of the antisemitic mob attacks of 19th century Russia, but organised and fomented by the Nazi government. A 'Reichspogrom', Germans now call it, to recognise at one time the violence of those days and its being premeditated and state-sanctioned, not 'spontaneous'.

The Nazi efforts simultaneously to contextualise the attacks of 9 and 10 November and to deny their full extent through a carefully managed narrative, are part of the significance of Kristallnacht. They illustrate well the way in which Nazi denial always began together with the act they wished to deny: one of many sobering warnings from history in these dark days. The use of euphemism - which would find its apex in the language of the Final Solution – finds an excellent early example in the very word 'Kristallnacht', Crystal Night or Night of

the Broken Glass, which was originally devised to conceal the violence against people under the shards of their broken windows.

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Last 7 October the world witnessed another planned ‘pogrom’ against Jews, this time in the towns and kibbutz communities of Southern Israel. Those responsible for it – Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad – deliberately and indiscriminately targeted civilians. They went house by house, they mowed them down in the fields, desecrated the bodies; shameless, they filmed themselves to boast and generate the content that will motivate the next generation of anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish terrorists. On 7 October Hamas and its allies in Gaza murdered more than 1300 and took hostage more than 200 civilians

As the world did on Kristallnacht, what we witnessed on 7 October was not only premeditated but founded in an antisemitic ideological dogma that has long been socialised, elaborated, imbued with political and moral meaning. And alas, taught to the next generation.

Hamas’s antisemitism is not Nazi antisemitism, but today as then antisemitism is a transnational hatred. Jews around the world find themselves involved and under threat, whether they wish to or not, and regardless of their political views, their identity, their religious beliefs, their citizenship. We have seen a synagogue firebombed in Germany, many others defaced, shots fired at a Jewish school in Montreal, and thousands of reports of harassment and intimidation in Europe, in the US, and here in New Zealand, where the situation should be of no less concern. Only last week we heard of the attempted arson in Auckland, and for weeks now the Holocaust Centre has collected reports of antisemitic incidents in schools throughout New Zealand: this is the harvest of public complacency around antisemitism, ambiguity in recognising its signs, and of populist stances appeasing those who have aggressively sought to tarnish and relativise the history of the Holocaust, and to isolate the Jewish community as a target of intimidation.

Hamas’s genocidal antisemitism has taken much public opinion by surprise; it shouldn’t have – in spite of a more ambiguous public relations strategy since 2009, Hamas has never repudiated its 1988 founding document, which calls for genocide of Jews. That document cited the 19th century Russian antisemitic treatise *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*,

accused the Jews of being behind World War Two and repeated well-worn and truly transnational antisemitic tropes, both ancient and modern. It is high time – as the Holocaust Centre of New Zealand has recently called for – that the New Zealand government join many other countries in formally ruling all of Hamas as a terrorist organisation, not only its military branch.

The history of the Holocaust demonstrates that antisemitism evolves: the old forms and narratives of religious anti-Judaism, of xenophobic aversion to a stubbornly different minority, of class-based, 'golf-club antisemitism', of superstition, ignorance, conformism and opportunism did not suddenly give way – in the 1930s – to the Nazi biological racism that paved the way for genocide. They all coexisted all the way through: we see it clearly at Kristallnacht in the inaction of the bystanders, the attempts to rationalise; we see it in a Swiss newspaper article that – in publishing a woman's first-account of the pogrom, felt it necessary to state that the lady was 'Swiss, and as remote from Judaism as the writer himself'; we see it in the reasons given at Evian and after for not taking Jewish refugees, chief and perhaps most heinous among them the idea that Jewish immigration would breed antisemitism: blaming Jews for antisemitism – another exceptionally stubborn trope.

Antisemitic narratives and symbols have lives and histories of their own: the Blood Libel travesty wondered from Norwich in 1144 through Europe for centuries, following economic and political crises into every part of the continent, propped up by Martin Luther in the 16th century and routinely revived, until we meet it in Tsarist pogroms in the early 20th Century, and then in Julius Streicher's *Der Sturmer* in 1934. Historian Magda Teter has tracked a specific engraving of the Blood Libel Accusation through many publications through the centuries, and in many languages, but these connections extend beyond the reproduction of an antisemitic image.

The enduring danger of the Blood Libel myth and its many symbols is the message that Jews rejoice and draw strength from the killing of children. We have already seen the same symbolism deployed in antisemitic Covid conspiracies, and right now texts are being produced to hijack the horrific plight of Gazan children to re-invigorate those myths. It is our collective responsibility to stop such lies wherever they arise, but we must be especially vigilant that those do not leap from Telegram and 8-Chan to mainstream media. In a plea to media, the Anti-Defamation League posited that the fake news of Israel's bombing of the Al-

Ahli Baptist hospital in Gaza already has the makings of a new Blood Libel, ready to travel and find fertile ground.

Today's antisemitism channels old prejudices and old hatred into new language. Chief among these are the resurfacing of ethnonationalism (Jews should beware of any conception of citizenship centred on race, even if its current proponents tend to have different targets), and the pretence and pretext of anti-Zionism. The latter is particularly insidious because under the guise of the legitimate cause of Palestinian independence, its has allowed - at least since the 1980s - the re-emergence of antisemitic tropes that had been relegated outside the realm of acceptable public discourse after WWII.

The undeniable and complex relationship between modern antisemitism and animosity towards Israel is why the IHRA definition of antisemitism – controversial though it is – attempts to devise a line between legitimate critique of Israel and the antisemitism of those who try to hold Jews responsible for Israeli actions, or to appropriate and contort Jewish history and culture for political ends. Calling out antisemitism in all its forms, and calling out those who ignore it, will help us reflect on universal patterns of discrimination: what Jews across New Zealand are experiencing every day when they are picked out, essentialised, and 'held responsible' for whatever, is the essence of racist discrimination.

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In *Zachor,* the master historian Yosef Haim Yerushalmi notes that the Hebrew word for remember — *zachor* — is repeated nearly 200 times in the Torah, with both the people of Israel and God commanded to remember: to remember the Sabbath, to remember the pact, to remember the exodus from Egypt, and so on.

Remembering is such a part of Jewish life that it transcends religious practice and becomes a secular commandment; it is no coincidence that Primo Levi, a secular Jew, survivor of Auschwitz and author of the seminal work *If This is a Man*, rewrote the Shema in the

epigraph to that work, replacing the commandment to remember Jews'monotheistic Faith with that of remembering the Holocaust.

It is notable, however, that Levi does not actually use the word 'remember', opting instead for different verbs: **'consider', 'engrave', 'repeat'** - *active* verbs to mark the *act* of remembering.

Among the first actions German and Austrian Jews did after Kristallnacht was collecting evidence, taking statements, hundreds of documents sent over the following weeks to the .... Centre in Amsterdam. Among te first things Warsaw Jews did when they were closed in the Ghetto was documenting: pamphlets filed away, German orders catalogued, and thousands of diaries penned with frantic energy:

'And so the Jew began to write...' - according to the legendary chronicler of the Warsaw ghetto Emanuel Ringelblum - *"everybody was writing – journalists, writers, teachers, public figures, teenagers and even the children."*

Jewish remembering is neither a sterile nor neutral pursuit. We remember to act and – as the HCNZ constitution puts it - we act by bearing witness.

As Michael Friedlander puts it, in Judaism, stories of persecution - "the destruction of the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem, the subsequent exile of the Jews from the Land of Israel and the expulsion of Jews from various countries... - *do not replace what came before, although they are centuries apart, they coexist in Jewish cultural and historical memory."* In her address, Deborah Hart wrote from Rome of the Arch of Titus: still today Roman Jews refuse to walk underneath that landmark. Even though the history has not changed, remembering the Holocaust after 7 October inevitably takes on new meaning.

As the Melbourne Holocaust Museum so eloquently put it just last week:

...as we commemorate Kristallnacht, we are deeply aware of the echoes and reverberations of history. History does not necessarily repeat, but it does instruct, which is why the work of Holocaust museums is so important.

I could not help but hear the echoes of countless Holocaust testimonies in the terrified ten-hour silence of the family of *Haaretz* correspondent Amir Tibon, whose family survived by lying quietly for hours in a safe room while Hamas terrorists hunted Jews outside. I hear those echoes still, and many others, in the violence, in the hatred, in the insensitivity of some public discourse, in the conscious and unconscious biases evident in some even skilfull media coverage.

I urge you to listen to the echoes, to support New Zealand's own Holocaust Centre in its vital work, and to recognise that – now as then - neutrality is not an *apolitical* position, but a *political* position that has its own costs and ramifications.

Giacomo Lichtner, 9 November 2023