

L'chaim—To Life After the Kristallnacht in Berlin
November 9, 1938
Part Three
By Norbert Lachman

After all this excitement, I finally found myself alone in my room, since my roommate was gone as well as the other boy who was standing to my left. I made up my mind to go into hiding. There still was a possibility that I could be arrested by the Gestapo at any time in this house. It just happened that one of the men left a bicycle behind, and for me that would be an ideal form of transportation to the Grunewald Forest. Fortunately, I remembered the way. The cook, Mrs. Ziegler, saw me and asked if I would like to come in her kitchen. She knew that I was leaving, but I did not reveal to her my destination. The reason I did not give her my destination was in case the Gestapo would come back to question her. In the kitchen, she offered me a glass of wine. We drank a glass of wine and said to each other, "L'Chayim" ("to life").

Riding the bicycle in the cold wind cut into my face. For me, that was the only way to be safe from the Gestapo. I did not get too far from our Ahawah house when around the corner, one of the oldest and biggest synagogues in Berlin was on fire. It was the Oranienburg Synagogue, where I and the others from the Ahawah house worshipped. In the street, to my horror, Sefer Torah scrolls were burning, as were prayer books, talesim and other Judaica from the temple. Nazis in their uniforms and civilians shouted "Bonfire aglow and death to the Jews. We want them to go." This went on and on. Unnoticed, I went back on my bike and kept going. To my horror, this nightmare was far from over. As I rode along a main street, I heard the sound of smashing. Hitler Youth gangs, with the help of civilians, were smashing store windows and looting. Glass splinters were all over the sidewalk and in the streets. Those glass splinters reflected in the moonlight like crystal in their splendor. The noise was deafening, as more and more windows were broken, among shouts of joy. I turned away from that main street into a local street. There I witnessed to my horror, Jewish people being dragged into the waiting SS Army trucks. Their few belongings were scattered all over the street, and the SS men were screaming their orders against the Jews. To me, what I just witnessed a world going mad, and there is nobody to stop it.

I turned into another street, and there the magnificent Prince Regent Synagogue was on fire, surrounded by broken glass from not only shop windows, but also from the windows of surrounding Jewish apartments. Suddenly I heard a big bang, and the dome of that synagogue came crashing down. The Fire Department just stood there, and they did nothing. More and more people came now to see this spectacle of hell. The crushing of the dome probably woke them up.

Eventually I was back on my bike, and saw one more synagogue on fire where some of the prayer books and the Sefrei Torah were stacked on the sidewalk, ready to be ignited. Still, my destination was the Grunewald Forest. It occurred to me, suddenly, that in order to get there, I had to pass one of the most guarded locations in all Berlin: "The Funkturm" or the main communications tower. Heavily armed Nazi troopers could be seen patrolling the surrounding areas. I wonder if they had known that a Jewish boy on a bike would pass them, you can imagine the outcome.

In case I was stopped, my passport hopefully would clear me. Once I entered this street, I was very careful to stay on the bike path. Somebody shouted in the dark "Heil Hitler." I was not sure if that was meant for me. In any case, to be safe I raised my right hand with a Nazi salute. I kept on going, and at dawn I arrived at the Grunewald Forest. Completely exhausted I found a place to stay, between trees and bushes, because that was a good camouflaged place to hide.

(Only a few years later, I found myself in a similar situation. But this time I was a corporal in the U.S. Army fighting with the infantry against the Nazis in France. We were well camouflaged

against the elements inside the hedges in the Normandy, in France 1944. The lesson well learned from hiding in the Grunewald Forest in 1938. I made it in World War II the D-Day landing at the Utah Beach all the way into the Rhineland. One of my greatest triumphs was the European invasion medal with my first Battle Star, and promotion to Staff Sergeant. Those honors I received in front of the now empty Military Headquarters of the Nazi General von Rundstedt in the Normandy. This was part of the "oberkommando" of the Wehrmacht, or Hitler's headquarters of his Armed Forces in this region of France.)

I lived in the Grunewald Forest for three days. I lived on cookies and water. On the third day, I made up my mind to go back and take a chance. I know the risk I took, just to go along the side of the Funkturm. I thanked God after passing this dangerous zone. I was now breathing easier, but not for long. To my dismay, Jewish people were still being arrested. I saw them in those open army trucks. I felt so sorry for them. Wherever I looked in the streets, there were still broken pieces of glass, because more windows were being smashed. After a long and hard ride, I finally arrived back at the Ahawah House. The cook, Mrs. Ziegler, was still there, and she was happy to see me. After a hot meal and a hot shower, she surprised me with a glass of wine. With tears in her eyes, we said one more time "L'Chayim" ("to life") but we both knew that we were living on borrowed time.

I asked about our housemother, Dr. Alexander. Mrs. Ziegler looked at me very sadly. She told me that after I left, Mrs. A. came down the stairs with her suitcase, and she asked Mrs. A., "where are you going?" Mrs. A. answered "it is time for me to go to Palestine into my new home." Mrs. Ziegler pleaded with her not to go, but she went and Mrs. Ziegler never heard from her again.

It was now my time to say goodbye to Mrs. Ziegler. Luckily, I still had enough money and with my passport to buy my return RR ticket to Danzig, to rejoin my family for the short time we were still fated to survive there.

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