

## Night of Broken Glass

'Dad,' Rita said, clearing her throat, 'I know you always told me that my great-grandpa died of a heart attack, but I don't believe it. I've heard things ... whispers. I want to know the truth.'

She was leaning on the kitchen bench as I tried to concentrate on making the coffee, her jeans torn at the knees in current youthful fashion and the laces of her sneakers absent. I waited while the coffee-maker heated, then said quietly, 'Suicide.' I sighed.

Her face settled into a grim frown. 'I thought that might be it. Because of the Nazis?'

'It was Kristallnacht,' I said.

'That was an anti-Jewish riot, wasn't it? We learned about it at school.'

'Pogrom would be a better word. Between 9 and 10 November 1938 there was an orchestrated attack throughout Germany against Jewish homes, businesses and synagogues.'

'Orchestrated as in centrally planned?' she asked.

'Oh yes,' I nodded. 'The orders came straight from the top. The street thugs of the SA were the main foot soldiers of the pogrom. But SS troopers and German civilians took part as well.'

'And this caused Great-grandpa to kill himself?' she asked in a trembling voice as tears began to well in the corners of her eyes.

'Yes it did,' I sighed. 'And he wasn't the only one.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean there were over 600 suicides among German Jews after Kristallnacht.'

Rita wiped her cheek and sniffed. 'So it was a preview of the Holocaust?'

'I would describe it as a milestone on the road to Auschwitz,' I replied. 'Before Hitler's rise to power, Jews were well integrated into German society. Of course there was antisemitism, but not enough to prevent Jews from playing a major role in business, science and culture. Over 100,000 Jews served in the German army during the First World War, with around 12,000 sacrificing their lives.'

'So when did it begin to go downhill?' Rita asked.

'There were sporadic acts of antisemitism after Hitler became chancellor in early 1933. But the big change came two years later with the enactment of the Nuremberg Laws. Those laws stripped German Jews of their citizenship. Their property was confiscated and many were thrown into the first concentration camp, at Dachau.'

'Monsters,' she muttered.

'Oh yes,' I agreed. 'Many Jews wanted to leave, but most countries had no desire to accept Jewish refugees.'

'More antisemitism,' Rita spat.

'In part. But you also have to remember that this was the middle of the Great Depression. Millions of people were out of work and it would have been political suicide to allow in large numbers of refugees ... regardless of who they might be.'

'I guess ...' she said. 'Did any manage to get out?'

‘Around 250,000 went to Palestine, but then the British shut off Jewish immigration through their White Paper of 1939.’

‘The bastards,’ Rita said.

‘It was a bastard of a thing to do,’ I nodded. ‘But the British wanted to guarantee supplies of Arab oil for war with Germany that by then they could see was inevitable.’

‘And sacrificing the Jews was just the cost of doing business,’ she growled.

‘The real irony was that this British attempt to placate the Arabs failed. Amin al-Husseyni spent the war in Berlin plotting with Henrich Himmler how to export the Holocaust to the Middle East if Rommel won in North Africa.’

‘Who was ... Amin al-Husseyni?’ Rita asked.

‘The Grand Mufti of Jerusalem and leader of the Palestinian Arabs. Iraqis also mounted a pro-German uprising in 1941.’

‘But what about Great-grandfather?’

‘Right. Well, the death camps hadn’t been built, but concentration camps were already fully operational. Jewish passports were marked with the letter J, phones were being tapped and the dragnet was closing in. My grandfather went from hiding place to hiding place in an attempt to escape the Gestapo.’

Knitting her eyebrows as she always did when she was curious, Rita enquired, ‘Didn’t he try to get away?’

‘His sister, brother-in-law and brother fled to Vilnius, but Grandpa stayed because he couldn’t bear to leave his parents. He thought things weren’t as bad as all that and wouldn’t get any

worse. He believed that Nazi antisemitism couldn't last; he clung to the hope that they lived in a democracy not a madhouse.'

'What about everyone else?' asked Rita. 'All the other Germans? Did they just stand by and watch?'

I shrugged. 'Do you mean on Kristallnacht? Some people gathered and watched in silence as the rioters burned synagogues ... some of them centuries old. It went on throughout the night in full view of the public and of local firefighters, who had received orders to intervene only to prevent flames from spreading to nearby buildings. Fires were lit, and prayer books, scrolls, artwork and philosophy texts were thrown on the flames, and buildings were burned or vandalised.'

'It seems to have happened so quickly, it must have been an enormous shock,' Rita exclaimed.

'Without warning, members of the Hitler Youth threw bricks and shattered the shop windows of Jewish-owned businesses and department stores then looted them.'

'How terrifying,' Rita said, pushing back in her chair.

'Tombstones were uprooted and graves violated in Jewish cemeteries, and other sacred sites were desecrated.'

'Shocking,' Rita said.

'Mobs of SA men attacked Jews in their homes and ransacked their houses or roamed the streets attacking Jews, forcing Jews to perform acts of public humiliation. Police records indicate that not only were many Jewish lives lost that night, but also there were many rapes and suicides.'

'It is beyond comprehension how people could behave like that,' Rita said, taken aback.

'Children threw stones at the windows of Jewish shops and nobody intervened. It was anarchy. Jewish property, Jewish people, were ruthlessly attacked.

Rita looked at me, nodded but remained silent. It was as if she couldn't find the words to express her shock and anger.

'My family had seen several anti-Jewish outbursts in Germany during the preceding years, but nothing as bad as that.'

'I don't doubt it.'

'It was as if normal people, civilised people, became barbarians, filled with antisemitism and blood lust. Synagogues throughout Germany and Austria were set alight. Tombstones were uprooted, and graves desecrated. Siddur prayer books and Torah scrolls were cast onto bonfires. Mobs of Nazi hooligans roamed the streets looting, raping and murdering.'

Rita blanched. 'There ... there were rapes?'

'Yes,' I snorted. 'Hundreds of them. Never mind the Nuremberg Laws against sexual relations between Jews and Aryans. And there were women cheering on the mob while mothers held up their babies to see the fun.'

'It makes me so angry,' Rita hissed.

It's almost enough to make you glad for every bomb dropped by the RAF and Americans on German cities ... almost. You never met Aunty Esther. I hate to say it, but she was violated by the Nazis.'

'How shocking!'

'She never spoke about it, but she carried the scars.'

'I don't wonder.' Rita indicated for me to continue.

'Very few people dared protest in public.'

'Pathetic,' Rita said. 'They should have shown some spine and stood up against the Nazi regime.'

'Easy to say now,' I sighed. 'But are you certain you'd have that sort of courage?'

Rita glared at me.

'Anyway, Goebbels explained away the burned synagogues and looted Jewish property as a spontaneous expression of indignation against the murder of a German diplomat in Paris.'

Rita listened to me in silence; her eyes closed.

I turned my attention to the coffee and set out two cups.

'One time, my grandfather received a telephone call from a business acquaintance warning that the Jews were about to be arrested.'

"'There must be a mistake,'" Grandpa protested. "No mistake," said the acquaintance. "I called to warn you." But Grandpa wouldn't believe it could be true.'

'So what convinced him?' Rita asked.

'My grandmother, Sara, insisted they leave.'

'How do you know all this?'

'Your great-aunt, Esther,' I said. 'She told me the story. She was one of the lucky ones who emerged from the war with her life.'

‘Hardly lucky given what happened to her.’ Rita said sharply.

‘Of course. But she lived. She had almost twenty years of life after the war, until cancer killed her. Now, let me concentrate on this coffee.’ I busied myself with the milk frothing and coffee and handed her a cup.

‘Thanks,’ she said. ‘So how did your grandfather and his family escape?’ Rita pressed.

‘The story goes that on the second night, the 10<sup>th</sup> of November, the doorbell rang and then fists began pounding on the door. A crowd outside began demanding entry, yelling “Open up, Jew, open up!” Your great-grandfather grabbed the Webley revolver he’d brought back from the war,’ I said, taking a sip of coffee.

‘He was a fighter,’ I smiled. ‘But as luck would have it, Ernst Hartman, his gentile business partner, happened to be visiting that night. He volunteered to answer the front door while Grandpa and the family went out the back. Grandpa heard his friend arguing with the stormtroopers as he slipped out the back door.’

Rita sat forward on the edge of her seat. ‘What did he hear?’

‘Apparently, his business partner declared on his honour as a member of the Nazi Party that there were no Jews in the house.’

‘Was he?’

‘A party member?’ I shrugged. ‘I don’t know. But I do know that Ernst Hartman showed himself to be a decent person that night. And he suffered for it.’

‘What do you mean?’ Rita asked.

‘One of the SA stormtroopers yelled, “Don’t mix with Jews”, and kicked Hartman in the groin.’

‘That’s terrible!’ she cried.

‘The next day your great-grandfather bought a newspaper. The headlines read “The Murder in Paris”, and “Jews Declare War on the German People”, and other such nonsense.’

‘What utter bulldust!’ spat Rita.

‘Of course. The Nazis were capitalising on the actions of Herschel Grynszpan.’

‘Who was he?’ she asked.

‘He was a Jew living illegally in France. Despite being born in Hanover, he was not a German citizen. Nor were his parents. When his mother and father were expelled across the border into Poland in October 1938, Grynszpan swore revenge. He bought a pistol and walked into the German embassy in Paris. He shot the first official he saw, a junior diplomat named Ernst vom Rath. Vom Rath died a few days later.’

‘And that was the excuse the Nazis needed?’ Rita asked.

‘Precisely,’ I said. ‘Hitler used vom Rath’s death as a pretext for the Kristallnacht pogrom. There are those who say the murder was the result of a homosexual love affair gone wrong. But I don’t believe it.’

Rita’s brow rose in a quizzical arch. ‘Why not?’



‘I think it was a tactic Grynszpan was planning to use to embarrass the Nazis at his trial.’

‘So he was extradited to Germany?’

I shook my head. ‘No, he was initially prosecuted and imprisoned in Paris. But the Germans got hold of him in 1940, after the surrender of France. Historians found correspondence from the Reich Justice Ministry warning about Grynszpan’s plan to use the jilted gay lover defence.’

‘So what happened?’ asked Rita.

‘The trial never took place. Grynszpan remained in prison at SS headquarters in Berlin and there’s considerable controversy about his fate.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Some argue that he was murdered in his cell, while others claim Grynszpan was seen in Paris after the war. But I don’t know.’

‘So what happened to the Jews after Kristallnacht?’ Rita asked.

‘The next day, Jewish children were expelled from state elementary schools. Jewish newspapers were shut down and cultural activities outlawed. Any Jew caught with a firearm was subject to twenty years’ imprisonment.’

‘So the Jews were disarmed and helpless with no ability to resist.’

‘Pretty much,’ I acknowledged. ‘All in all, over 30,000 Jewish men were sent to concentration camps like Dachau and Buchenwald. More than 250 synagogues were destroyed throughout the Reich.’

‘Terrible,’ said Rita, ‘but mild by comparison to what came later, I guess.’

I took my coffee around the bench to the stool and perched there, reaching for the biscuit jar. I offered her first choice.

‘Thanks,’ she said, taking two chocolate-coated ones.

‘Towards the end of her life, Aunt Esther would lie in bed beneath heavy blankets talking about life in the “alte land” – that’s old country in Yiddish. She would smile as she spoke about her comfortable life in Berlin during the 1920s. But when she moved on to life under Hitler, her tears would begin to flow.’

Rita leant over the bench and kissed me on the forehead. ‘I’m sorry, Papa.’

‘Anyway, Kristallnacht triggered one last wave of Jewish emigration from Germany. Most went to other European countries like Holland and France.’

Rita sighed. ‘Which means they were once again in danger after those countries fell to the Germans.’

‘Yes,’ I answered, ‘but some were able to reach Palestine and a handful gained visas for the US. Several thousand more fled to Shanghai, where they were left alone by the Japanese army after war broke out in December 1941.’

‘And your grandfather?’ Rita asked in a subdued voice, ‘Why did he suicide?’

‘My grandfather ... your great-grandfather ... was not a well man. He had terrible health problems. Add Nazi antisemitism to the mix and you have a recipe for hell on earth. It was hard for Jews unless they had a lot of money hidden away.’

‘So sad,’ Rita murmured.

‘That it was,’ I nodded. ‘Little by little he had to sell his property, first the warehouses, then the block of flats, and the apartment. According to Esther, he couldn’t bear to tell his family the truth. My grandmother was still buying new clothes and expensive crystalware. But the bills kept mounting. He managed to buy my father a ticket to Australia – he couldn’t afford to pay for my uncle’s college tuition or my aunt’s wedding dress. By the end, he couldn’t even pay the butcher or the rent when it was collected in the courtyard where he had once sat as the owner.’

I paused and pulled a tissue from a box on the bench to wipe the tears away. ‘I guess he just couldn’t bear it any longer,’ I sighed. ‘It was like that, in those days. People watched their lives slipping away as they lost their social position and were unable to support their families. So many Jewish men just came home one day and killed themselves.’

Rita was silent.

Taking a deep breath, I went on. ‘It’s strange, really. Later, in the ghetto, people didn’t often kill themselves. It was mostly the opposite. People wanted to hang on to life just one more day in the hope of seeing the Germans lose the war before they died. But my grandfather never saw any of that. And if he’d known what he left them behind to face, I’m sure he would never have done it.’

I glanced up and saw the pain etched across Rita’s face. ‘Do you want to stop?’

She shook her head. But I still didn’t know what to do. Should I continue to talk? Or would I just upset her more? I recalled the tears rolling down Esther’s old, lined cheeks when

she was lying in bed, and she told me my grandfather had hanged himself. But other people said he jumped from a window. In things like that, people don't always want to share the details. But the story itself always ended the same ... with my grandfather dead.

'Was there any dissent among the Nazi leadership?' Rita suddenly asked.

'Not really,' I shrugged. 'Göring was slightly annoyed because he wanted to steal Jewish property intact, rather than destroy it. He met with other members of the Nazi leadership a couple of days later and introduced a letter from the Führer requesting that the Jewish question be solved. So he canvassed the meeting for ideas about how best to eliminate the Jewish presence once and for all from the German economy.'

'Monsters,' Rita said. 'Gluttonous monsters.'

'Oh, yes indeed,' I said. 'Of course, you've heard about Göring's collection of plundered art?'

Rita nodded.

'Anyway, the persecution inflicted on German Jews continued after Kristallnacht. The community was forced to pay a levy of twenty per cent on all Jewish property for the murder of vom Rath. A fine of another six million Reichsmarks was imposed for property damage to the Reich government, for damages to the German Nation, and Jews were required to pay for the damage caused by the pogrom to their residences and businesses.'

'Those freaks,' fumed Rita. 'What about the world? Didn't they see what was happening?'

'In a way, Kristallnacht was the moment the world became aware of the extent of antisemitism in Nazi Germany. The pogrom was too vast and brutal to conceal. And Goebbels's rationalisations and justifications rang hollow to the international community and the rest of the world. The Nazi government's deliberate policy of inciting violence laid bare the repressive nature and widespread antisemitism entrenched in Germany.'

Rita leaned back. 'But to what effect?'

'World opinion on the Nazis soured. Regrettably, here in Australia, it was only an Indigenous leader named William Cooper who led a march through the streets of Melbourne to the German Consulate where he delivered a petition condemning the persecution of the Jews. German officials refused to accept the petition.'

'That's amazing!' marvelled Rita.

'William Cooper was a voice of righteousness in a wilderness of indifference. But it's also true that many newspapers began to condemn the Third Reich. *The Times* of London called Kristallnacht a disgrace.'

'An understatement,' sighed Rita, 'but better than nothing, I suppose.'

The Americans recalled their ambassador from Berlin, but stopped short of severing diplomatic relations.'

'Typical of the Yanks,' snorted Rita.

'Well, Winston Churchill did once say that the Americans always did the right thing ... after trying every possible alternative.'

Rita couldn't contain a grim smile at Churchill's witticism.

‘In Britain, the Chamberlain government agreed to receive one thousand German Jewish children ... the so-called Kindertransport.’

‘One thousand ...’

We were both silent for a time. Then Rita said, ‘So it’s fair to say that Kristallnacht was a prelude to the Holocaust.’

I nodded. ‘It ramped up Nazi persecution of the Jews from economic and social exclusion to brute violence. Kristallnacht was a foreshadowing of Babi Yar and Auschwitz.’

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