

WORLD HISTORY

Susan Strauss (left)
and her mother near
their home in Germany



SURVIVING KRISTALLNACHT

Seventy-five years ago this month, the Nazis attacked Jewish homes, businesses, and synagogues, unleashing a wave of terror across Europe

WORDS TO KNOW

- **Nazi** (*n*): a member of a political party dedicated to German dominance of Europe and the destruction of the Jews
- **Holocaust** (*n*): the mass extermination of Jews and others by the Nazis from 1933 to 1945
- **concentration camp** (*n*): a prison or place of forced labor; often a general term that includes death camps, where millions of people were killed

Susan Strauss was 12 years old on November 10, 1938, when an angry mob wielding shovels stormed into her apartment in Frankfurt, Germany. She watched in fear as they smashed dishes, ripped books, and hurled furniture. They “demolished the whole apartment,” recalls Strauss, now 87 and living in the U.S.

All over Frankfurt, crowds of **Nazi** supporters were setting synagogues on fire, breaking the windows of Jewish-owned businesses, and beating Jews in the streets. At the same time, similarly vicious attacks were taking place throughout Germany and parts of German-occupied Austria and Czechoslovakia.

Anti-Semitism (discrimination against Jews) was common in Europe in the 1930s. But never

before had it escalated into such widespread violence. By the time the riots ended later that evening, the Nazis had set fire to nearly 300 synagogues, destroyed 7,500 businesses, killed 100 Jews, and beaten and tortured thousands of others. In the aftermath of the attacks, the shattered windows of Jewish homes and storefronts littered the streets, giving rise to the name Kristallnacht, or “Night of Broken Glass.”

The destruction was one of the first major events of the **Holocaust**. German dictator Adolf Hitler and the Nazis would soon begin implementing the “Final Solution,” their plan to systematically murder all the Jews of Europe.





Left: A synagogue in Nuremberg, Germany, destroyed during Kristallnacht. **Top:** A man looks at a vandalized Jewish shop. **Above:** A banner reading "Germans, do not buy from Jews" hangs from a synagogue in Berlin. **Inset:** The Nazis required Jews to wear yellow stars on their clothing.

Nazi Rise to Power

Before Hitler became chancellor of Germany in 1933, Strauss lived a normal, happy life. Her parents owned a general store, and she and her younger sister had many friends. But "everything changed very quickly in 1933," says Strauss.

Hitler hated Jews, whom he blamed for Germany's defeat in World War I (1914-1918). In 1935, he stripped German Jews of citizenship and the right to vote. Before long, Jews weren't allowed to hold certain jobs or attend public schools. Many Jewish businesses were seized. Soon, Strauss's friends stopped talking to her and she was

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THE BOOK THIEF

Australian author Markus Zusak got the idea for his best-selling novel *The Book Thief* after hearing stories from his mother, who grew up in Nazi Germany. The book was recently made into a movie, which hits theaters this month. It tells the story of Liesel, a girl who moves in with a foster family in Germany just before the start of the war. Liesel finds comfort in stealing books and sharing them with Max, the Jewish man her foster parents are hiding in their basement. *JS* recently caught up with Zusak.



JS How did your mother's stories inspire the book?

Markus Zusak She'd talked about things so vividly that I really knew the town she grew up in and many of the characters in it. . . . I took all of those stories and then started to imagine . . . what *might* have happened.

JS The book is narrated by Death. Why did you make that choice?

MZ There's the common expression that war and death are like best friends, so who better to tell a story set during wartime? After all, death is everywhere during war. The idea interested me.

JS A major theme in the book is the power of words and language. How were words important to the Nazis?

MZ Hitler cultivated the thoughts of a nation with words. He destroyed people with words, and Liesel is stealing the words back. . . . She's taking them and writing her own story, and it's hopefully a beautiful story written amongst the ugly world that Hitler created around her.

JS How might reading a novel or watching a movie about the Holocaust be different from reading a textbook about it?

MZ It becomes more personal. You do get to experience it all through the life of someone else. . . . Not to say that a textbook can't have feeling in it, but novels and films usually invite you into one person's experience.

JS What did you learn about the Holocaust while writing the book?

MZ I learned that there are so many stories that come from that period of history. It's almost a well that will never run dry. I also learned that as horrific as many of the stories are, I'm grateful that people are still telling them, because it's something that should never be forgotten.



forced to transfer to an all-Jewish school nearly two hours away.

In October 1938, Hitler began deporting Polish Jews living in Germany. Herschel Grynszpan, a 17-year-old Polish Jew studying in France, learned that his family had been forced to leave their home. On November 7, he went to the German embassy in Paris looking for revenge and shot the German official assigned to his case.

Nazi leaders used the assassination as an excuse to launch the Kristallnacht riots, ordering their supporters to attack Jews on November 9 and 10. In addition to destroying property, Nazis arrested 30,000 Jewish men—including Strauss's father—and sent them to

concentration camps.

In the weeks that followed, thousands of Jews tried to flee Germany for other countries. But many had nowhere to go. Several nations, including the U.S., had set quotas that limited the number of immigrants. Strauss and her family were trapped.

Hitler's War

Kristallnacht was only the beginning. In September 1939, Hitler set out to conquer Europe. He started by invading Poland. Within days, the continent erupted into World War II (1939-1945). The war eventually pitted the Allies (including the U.S., Great Britain, and the Soviet Union) against the Axis Powers (including Germany, Italy, and Japan).

By 1942, German forces occupied much of Europe. As more Jews came under Germany's control, they were herded into

crowded ghettos in preparation for deportations to concentration camps. In January 1942, Strauss and her family were sent to the ghetto in Riga, Latvia. She was 16.

Strauss and thousands of other Jews were forced to live in a tiny fenced-in area of the city and do backbreaking work day after day in the bitter cold. After nearly two years, Strauss was sent to the Kaiserwald concentration camp in Latvia, where she was separated from her family. Eventually, she was moved to Stutthof, a death camp in Poland. Strauss and the other prisoners lived in filthy huts surrounded by barbed wire. They were given little food or water.

"Most of the time we just ate

was sent to work on a Soviet farm. She was eventually forced to move back to Poland, where she met her husband, a fellow survivor.

Within months, the Allies liberated the remaining camps. Germany surrendered on May 8, 1945 (V-E Day, or Victory in Europe Day). In August, the U.S. dropped two atomic bombs on Japan, bringing an end to the war in the Pacific.

Never Again

By the time Germany surrendered, the Nazis had killed more than 6 million European Jews—two thirds of the continent's Jewish population—and 5 million others, including Poles, Roma,

Communists, and the disabled. Many had been shot and thrown into mass graves or herded into gas chambers. Others died in the camps from hunger or disease. About 1 million of the victims were children.

Strauss says she can't believe that she survived. She and her husband, Herman Taube, moved to the U.S. in 1947. They settled in Maryland, where

they reunited with Strauss's father, the only member of her family to survive.

Today, Strauss volunteers at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. She says it's important to share her story to ensure that the atrocities committed during the Holocaust aren't repeated.

It was "one of the darkest chapters in man's history," says Strauss. "It should never happen again." —Rebecca Zissou



the grass from the ground and whatever we could find," she says.

In January 1945, in the final months of the war, Allied troops were closing in on Germany. Nazi guards forced Strauss and the other prisoners to march nearly 100 miles in freezing temperatures to the Lauenburg camp in Poland, away from approaching Allied troops. Many prisoners died along the way. Then, on March 10, 1945, Soviet forces liberated her camp.

With nowhere to go, Strauss