

Parallel Journeys

INFORMATIONAL TEXT
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Introduction

Parallel Journeys weaves together the stories of two young Germans—Alfons Heck (1928–2005), an enthusiastic participant in the Hitler Youth, and Helen Waterford (b. 1909), a Jewish girl who flees to Holland to avoid persecution by the Nazis, only to be captured and sent to Auschwitz, a concentration camp in German-occupied Poland. Partially narrated in the protagonists' own words, the book serves as a warning against hatred and discrimination and offers an uplifting message about peace and understanding. The excerpt here focuses on recollections of *Kristallnacht*, the Night of Broken Glass.


“It was *Kristallnacht*, the night of broken glass.”

from Chapter 4: *Kristallnacht: The Night of Broken Glass*

- 1 On the afternoon of November 9, 1938, we were on our way home from school when we ran into small troops of SA and SS men¹, the Brownshirts and the Blackshirts. We watched open-mouthed as the men jumped off trucks in the marketplace, fanned out in several directions, and began to smash the windows of every Jewish business in Wittlich².
- 2 Paul Wolff, a local carpenter who belonged to the SS, led the biggest troop, and he pointed out the locations. One of their major targets was Anton Blum's shoe store next to the city hall. Shouting SA men threw hundreds of pairs of shoes into the street. In minutes they were snatched up and carried home by some of the town's nicest families—folks you never dreamed would steal anything.
- 3 It was *Kristallnacht*, the night of broken glass. For Jews all across Europe, the dark words of warning hurled about by the Nazis suddenly became very real. Just two weeks earlier, thousands of Polish Jews living in Germany had been arrested and shipped back to Poland in boxcars. Among them was the father of seventeen-year-old Herschel Grynszpan, a German Jew who was living in France. Outraged by the Nazis' treatment of his family, Herschel walked into the German Embassy in Paris and shot Ernst vom Rath, the secretary.
- 4 The murder spawned a night of terror. It was the worst pogrom—the most savage attack against the Jews of Germany—thus far in the twentieth century. Leading the attack was the brutal, boorish SS—the *Schutzstaffel*. On their uniforms, SS members wore **emblems** shaped like double lightning bolts, perfect **symbols** of the terror and suddenness with which they swooped from the night to arrest their frightened victims.

1. **SA and SS' men** members of paramilitary organizations under Adolf Hitler and the Nazis, and later throughout German-occupied Europe during World War II, which were responsible for enforcing Nazi policies
2. **Wittlich** a town in Southwest Germany

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In these paragraphs, Alfons Heck describes the events of *Kristallnacht* in a calm, unemotional manner. It is the kind of account you might find in a history book. He reports the facts but does not make any personal judgments about what took place.

- 5 Heading the *Schutzstaffel* was Heinrich Himmler who worshipped Adolf Hitler. Himmler was a man of great organizational skills, with a passion for perfect record keeping and a heart as black as his *Schutzstaffel* uniform. His power in the *Reich*³ was tremendous; only Hitler reigned above him.
- 6 Working under Himmler to carry out the savagery of *Kristallnacht* was Reinhard Heydrich, the number-two man in the SS. His victims dubbed him “The Blond Beast.” Even Hitler called him the man with the iron heart. On direct orders from Heydrich, Jewish homes and businesses were destroyed and synagogues burned. “**Demonstrations**,” the SS called the violence, and they informed police that they were to do nothing to stop them.
- 7 “As many Jews, especially rich ones, are to be arrested as can be **accommodated** in the prisons,” the orders read. Immediately officials at the concentration camps—the special prisons set up by the Nazis—were **notified** that Jews would be shipped there right away. SS men stormed the streets and searched the attics of Jewish homes, throwing their victims onto trucks to be hauled off to the camps.
- 8 Four or five of us boys followed Wolff’s men when they headed up the *Himmeroder Strasse* toward the Wittlich synagogue. Seconds later the beautiful lead crystal window above the door crashed into the street, and pieces of furniture came flying through doors and windows. A shouting SA man climbed to the roof and waved the rolls of the Torah, the sacred Jewish religious scrolls. “Use it for toilet paper, Jews,” he screamed. At that, some people turned shamefacedly away. Most of us stayed, as if riveted to the ground, some grinning evilly.
- 9 It was horribly brutal, but at the same time very exciting to us kids. “Let’s go in and smash some stuff,” urged my buddy Helmut. With shining eyes, he bent down, picked up a rock and fired it toward one of the windows. I don’t know if I would have done the same thing seconds later, but at that moment my Uncle Franz grabbed both of us by the neck, turned us around and kicked us in the seat of the pants. “Get home, you two *Schweinhunde*,” he yelled. “What do you think this is, some sort of circus?”
- 10 Indeed, it was like a beastly, **bizarre** circus of evil. All across Germany the scene was the same. Terror rained down upon the Jews as Nazis took to the streets with axes, hammers, grenades, and guns. According to reports from high Nazi officials, some 20,000 Jews were arrested, 36 killed, and another 36 seriously injured. Thousands of Jews were hauled to concentration camps during *Kristallnacht*. There many died or were beaten severely by Nazi guards who used this chance to take revenge on a hated people.

3. **Reich** referring to the German empire

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The Waterford family were victims of *Kristallnacht* rather than just observers, but there are connections between the two accounts. Helen, however, makes personal judgments. She mentions a “helpful” neighbor who told the SA where Jews could be found.

11 Across Europe, Jews panicked as news of the horrors of *Kristallnacht* reached them. In Amsterdam, Helen and Siegfried got their first reports in a phone call from Helen’s family.

12 My hometown of Frankfurt, with its 35,000 Jews, had four synagogues. The pogrom started with the burning of the synagogues and all their sacred contents. Jewish stores were destroyed and the windows shattered.

13 Nearly every house was searched for Jewish men. The SA, in plain clothes, came to my parents’ apartment to arrest my father and eighteen-year-old brother. A “helpful” neighbor had shown them where in the roomy attic Jews might be hiding. My brother was deported to Buchenwald—a concentration camp near Weimar in eastern Germany—as was Siegfried’s brother, Hans.

14 It was not enough for the Jews to suffer destruction of their homes and businesses, beatings and arrests by the SS, and deportation to concentration camps. The Nazis now ordered that the victims must pay for the loss of their own property. The bill for broken glass alone was five million marks. Any insurance money that the Jews might have claimed was taken by the government. And because many of the buildings where Jews had their shops were actually owned by Aryans, the Jews as a group had to pay an additional fine “for their abominable crimes, etc.” So declared Hermann Goring, a high-ranking Nazi who was in charge of the German economy. He set their fine at one *billion* marks.

15 For the Jews still left in Germany, the future looked very grim. Many had fled, like Helen and Siegfried, after the first ominous rumblings from Hitler’s government. But thousands still remained. These people simply refused to believe that conditions would get any worse. They thought the plight of the Jews would improve, if only they were patient. Helen’s father was among them.

16 Although he had lost his business, he was still stubbornly optimistic about the future of the Jews in Germany. Earlier in the summer of 1938 he had been arrested, for no particular reason, and sent to Buchenwald. At that time it was still possible to get people out of a camp if they had a visa to another country. Siegfried and I got permission from the Dutch government for him to come to Holland, but he did not want to leave Germany without his wife and son. Since they had no visas, he stayed with them and waited—until it was almost too late.

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