

## Memories of *Kristallnacht*: The Last *Bar Mitzvah*

### INFORMATION SHEET AND ACTIVITIES FOR LEARNERS

#### 1. Information about *Kristallnacht*

On 9 and 10 November 1938, the Nazi regime and their collaborators conducted a series of attacks called 'pogroms' against the Jewish population in Germany and the other occupied territories. Pogrom is a Russian word meaning 'to wreak havoc, to demolish violently'. This event became known as *Kristallnacht* or 'Night of Broken Glass' because of the shattered glass that filled the streets after the vandalism and destruction of synagogues, Jewish-owned businesses, and homes. As you will hear in the audio clip from an oral history interview with former Welsh resident Julius Weil, who was a young child in Germany at the time, schools were also targeted and destroyed.



[Interior view of the destroyed Fasanenstraße Synagogue, Berlin, burned during the November Pogroms, November 1938.](#)

Image: Center for Jewish History, New York City.  
Courtesy of Leo Baeck Institute.



[Germans pass by the broken shop window of a Jewish-owned business that was destroyed during Kristallnacht, 10 November 1938.](#)

*Image: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Photo Archives # 86838.  
Courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration, College Park.  
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During *Kristallnacht*, at least 91 people were murdered, and many others took their own lives. Around 30,000 Jewish males were taken to concentration camps, particularly those at Buchenwald, Dachau and Sachsenhausen. Concentration camps were areas where large numbers of people were imprisoned and subjected to forced labour (in World War 2, they were also places to await deportation to death camps). This was the first time that Nazi officials made large-scale arrests of Jews simply because they were Jews.

Following *Kristallnacht*, the Nazi regime forced the Jewish community to pay a 1 billion Reichsmark 'atonement tax' and introduced new anti-Jewish measures with the aim to isolate and segregate Jews from their fellow Germans: All Jewish-owned businesses were closed; Jews were barred from all public schools and universities, as well as from cinemas, theatres, and sports facilities.

*Kristallnacht* was the trigger for many Jews to flee Germany if they could. Julius Weil came to England with his school and later moved to Merthyr Tydfil, becoming an active member of the local Jewish community.

## 2. Julius Weil's Biography

Julius Weil was born in Dortmund, Germany, on 11 October 1925. Julius then lived in Köln (Cologne) with his parents and younger brother until 1938. After his Jewish school was destroyed during the *Kristallnacht* pogrom on 9-10 November 1938, the headmaster arranged for the whole school to be transferred to London. Julius recalls that he was on the first *Kindertransport* train to leave the country; sadly, this was the last time that he saw his parents and brother.

Julius originally lived in London before being evacuated to Bedford to stay with a non-Jewish family. He left school at the age of fifteen and initially took work in the fur trade but had to give this up as he turned out to be allergic to fur. In 1942 he went to work for the Ministry of Supply (MOS). He began this work in Bedford and then relocated to Surrey at the end of World War 2. Julius then left the MOS and found work in a factory in Surrey for several years.

In 1956, he was contacted by the first friend he made in England, who was also a Jewish refugee, who asked if he wanted to work at the company his uncle owned in Pentrebach, near Merthyr Tydfil. Julius accepted and spent the rest of his life working for the Standard Box and Carton Company, eventually becoming its director.

Julius died in Cardiff in 2021.

## 3. Activities

### ACTIVITY 1

a) Consider and discuss in pairs or small groups the ['One Spring' painting by Karl Bodek and Kurt Conrad Löw](#):

- What can you see in this picture?
- What might this image represent?
- What might the barbed wire, the butterfly and the colour yellow **symbolise**?

b) Communicate the main discussion points to the whole class.

### ACTIVITY 2

a) Watch a [short film about Bar or Bat Mitzvah](#).

b) Consider and discuss in small groups:

- What is a *Bar or Bat Mitzvah*?

- What is the meaning of the ceremony?
- How do young people prepare for the day and how do they feel?
- What similar ceremonies exist in other faiths?
- Why are ceremonies and rituals important?

c) Communicate the main discussion points to the whole class.

### ACTIVITY 3

a) Watch a [video clip](#) from an interview with a Holocaust survivor Julius Weil. In the clip, Julius recalls his *Bar Mitzvah* in Köln (Cologne), Germany, which was held three weeks before Kristallnacht and the destruction of his synagogue.

#### Transcript:

*Julius Weil: My Bar Mitzvah preparation took place when I was twelve and at thirteen, I did have my Bar Mitzvah in the synagogue called the Glockengasse in Cologne [Köln in German]. The synagogue which was an old one. It was probably I would say at that time, in 1938, it would have probably been a hundred years old. But on Kristallnacht, of course, it was burnt and destroyed together with lots of other synagogues, and this was just over two weeks after my Bar Mitzvah. And, therefore, mine was the last to take place in this particular synagogue.*

b) Consider and discuss in pairs/small groups:

- How might Julius have felt about his *Bar Mitzvah* being the last in the synagogue before it was destroyed during *Kristallnacht*?
- What about the young Jewish people in Cologne and across Europe who were never able to have their ceremony? How might they feel?

c) Communicate the main discussion points to the whole class.

### ACTIVITY 4

Create an installation artwork working in small groups of three or four.

Artists and theatre-makers often use **symbolism** to tell a story.

Using the different materials you have been provided with or items you have to hand, your task is to create an installation\* that captures the story of 'the last *Bar Mitzvah*' and the aftermath of the violent destruction of synagogues during *Kristallnacht*.

You might wish to consider:

- Which specific objects do you want to include? Be selective. Are these going to be adapted or altered in any way? (E.g., a ripped-up paper invitation.)
- Spacing. Where are your objects going to be positioned and what might this represent? (E.g., think of the butterfly on top of the barbed wire.)
- Use of colours. What might different colours represent?
- Use of lighting (and shadows).
- Do you wish to use any sound? Perhaps a piece of instrumental music or a sound effect?

## ACTIVITY 5

Reflect on the artwork created and write a short report:

- Which installation had the biggest impact on you and why?
- What did you enjoy about creating the installation? What were the challenges?