SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO THIS MONTH, THE NAZIS ATTACKED JEWISH HOMES, BUSINESSES, AND SYNAGOGUES, UNLEASHING A WAVE OF TERROR ACROSS EUROPE

WORLD HISTORY

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

SURVIVING KRISTALLNACHT

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.

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
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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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 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 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
Just before the start of World War II, Hitler and Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin signed a non-aggression pact, agreeing not to go to war against each other. Hitler broke the agreement in June 1941, when he invaded the Soviet Union.

The U.S. joined the war after Japan bombed the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941. The U.S. fought with the Allies, including Great Britain, France, and the Soviet Union.

Germany surrendered on May 8, 1945, known as V-E Day (Victory in Europe Day). The war against Japan ended in August, days after the U.S. dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

QUESTIONS

1. What is the capital of Germany?
2. When did Hitler invade the Soviet Union?
3. Which countries bordered Germany in 1943-44?
4. Which capital shown on the map is southeast of Rome?
5. About how many miles separate Kaiserwald and Stutthof?
6. Which body of water separates Great Britain and France?
7. Which countries along the North Sea did Germany occupy in 1943-44?
8. The U.S. dropped atomic bombs on which two Japanese cities?
9. Which countries on the map were neutral in 1943-44?
10. Which two Italian islands were controlled by the Allies in 1943-44?