



Gudrun Pausewang, *Ich war dabei* (I Was There)

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A Morning in November (p. 34-37)

It was the morning of the 10th November 1938. I don't know what day in the week it was, but it was a schoolday. I walked to school with my satchel on my back.

I was a proud 10 year and 8 months old and was visiting the comprehensive school. We lived in a lower Silesian village near the Polish border. In less than a year the Second World War would break out.

While I walked along my daily way to school, I let my thoughts run freely, as usual. Why had mum and dad been so agitated at breakfast this morning? They had switched on the radio for news and engaged in a vivid conversation. Something called "synagogues" had burnt and it had to do with the Jews. The Jews, as we had already learnt in school, were bad people who wanted to exploit the good Germans and take them for a ride. We had been taught that one mustn't be friends with Jews as friendship is unknown to them. We had also learned that Jews are not trustworthy, because they always lie. We had also been told that we shouldn't feel sorry for the Jews; having a bad character, they do not deserve sympathy.

And much more had we learned about the Jews. That one can recognise them by their bent noses, for example.

"Burned down the synagogues?" my mother had said. "I don't think that's right. Synagogues are not department stores. When their synagogues burn, it concerns their religion and that should be left out of it."

"It's their own fault", was my dad's reply. "The German nation has been patient for long enough. Our patience has finally run out and the bottled anger has come out."

What had happened? I wanted to know more, but mum and dad had been so worked up that they didn't answer my questions. That was very unusual. Most of the time they took my questions very seriously. They often pressed me to ask questions. Especially on our Sunday walks they spent a lot of time with me and tried to explain whatever I didn't understand.

I decided to ask them again when I returned from school: "What are synagogues? Whose fault is it? Why has the German nation lost its patience?"

Someone called my name. I stopped and turned around. It was a girl from my class, Lotti Fiebig.

"Come on", she called, "we'll walk across the town square today. There's something to be seen!" "What is it?" I asked curiously. "They have smashed Weinstein's shopwindow last night and stolen everything!"

I *had* to see that, such an opportunity couldn't be missed! When did something ever happen in our small town. Everything would be cleared away by the time school would be out so we had to go now, immediately!

We started to run in order to save time. The pencil cases rattled in our satchels. Another girl from our class joined us. Roswitha Bollwitz. She was also on her way to Weinstein. Of course, we all knew his shop. There were buttons and thread, crochet hooks and knitting needles, embroidery silk and wool for sale. Also tablecloths with preprinted cross stitch patterns. And ric-rac braid and thimbles. My mum called it haberdashery shop. I had also sometimes bought this or that, carrying a note in my hand, on which my mum had listed everything. Weinstein, a fat old man with a bald head, had always been friendly to me. And very patient when I couldn't decipher my mother's writing immediately.

"Smashed the sho-hop-window?" I panted, running along. "Why?"

"Because Weinstein is a Je-hew!" Roswitha panted back.

Yes, I knew that. Mother had mentioned that to me. She had also added: "But a harmless one."

"He is innocuous" I replied. "My father says that there is no such thing as innocuous Jews," wheezed Roswitha.

As we took the last corner we saw the shop diagonally in front of us. That is to say we only saw the top half of the shop. In front of the bottom half crowded many people. They stood in a big half circle. We pushed through this wall of gawpers and now saw that old Weinstein was silently sweeping the broken glass outside his shop.

The shopwindow was almost empty. Only a few knitting needles and a darning egg remained on the torn decoration paper and there were two knitted children's hats and a red ric-rac braid hanging on the side wall. In front of the window, in between two paving stones, I spotted several pins with their coloured heads glinting.

A crime had obviously been committed: Thieves had smashed the shop window in order to reach the thread, wool, knitting needles and buttons, scissors and dressmaking patterns. And they had succeeded: The window was as good as empty.

I wondered. To smash a window in order to steal such small items, was that worth it? The thieves had to expect a prison sentence if caught! And I didn't doubt that the proficient police force would catch them. Then the stolen needles and pin cushions and mercerized yarn and the wool and all the other items would be found and returned to Weinstein – and everything, everything would be in order once more.

But why were all the gawpers so silent? Nobody said a comforting word to Weinstein, noone asked him how it had happened, nobody took the broom from the old man in order to help. There weren't any whispers exchanged between the people. What happened in front of my eyes was like a film without sound.

Lotti Fiebig elbowed me. That meant: We have to go, otherwise we'll be late for school. – Lotti must have found the silence as oppressive as myself that she didn't dare whisper to me. But I couldn't leave the place in front of the destroyed shop window. It felt as if I had to wait for something.

That's when the connections came into my head: Had mum and dad not spoken about the Jews over breakfast? That their synagogues had been burned. Had I not heard my father say: "It's their own fault!" I now suspected - with my ten years of age - that something much bigger and much more dreadful had happened than a small break-in, a ridiculous theft of thread and darning yarn and crochet hooks and thimbles! And that this outrageous thing wasn't over yet. I stared at old Weinstein, thought myself into his shoes. He must feel as if in a pillory. Tears rushed into my eyes. I felt such a tension inside myself that it hurt. I was filled with sympathy and sorrow for this poor old man.

At the same time I terrified myself: One mustn't feel sympathy with Jews! We had learned that in school: Jews were not worthy of German feelings. What you learn in school is right, is it not?

I seem to remember that I arrived at school on my own that morning. Being late.