

A CURRENT ISSUE



Crystal Night and Prayer

By Kai Kjær-Hansen

This column was written in the days immediately after November 9–10, dates which probably mean little to most people. But these dates are significant in Jewish history and presumably also in German history. These dates should also be remembered by us who are involved in Jewish evangelism. Indeed, they should be commemorated in such a way that we are challenged to reflection and self-criticism.

Seventy years ago, in 1938, German Jews were violently attacked on November 9–10. Ninety-one Jews were murdered; approximately 25,000 Jews were sent to concentration camps; 267 synagogues were ruined or burnt down; Jewish burial grounds were desecrated; and more than 7,000 shops were destroyed. The streets were strewn with broken glass from the shop windows, which gave this horrible event the name “die Kristallnacht” – “Crystal Night” or “Night of Broken Glass.”

This became the starting signal for the extermination of Jews in Nazi Germany and other countries – six million Jews, among them one and a half million children. The starting signal was fired in Germany – Europe’s cultural center, a “Christian nation” then in the grip of Nazi ideology.

The seventy-year anniversary of Kristallnacht has been commemorated all over the world, including Germany, and also in Denmark, which is my observation post.

As a Dane, born in April 1945 in the last days of the war, I have no part or lot in Kristallnacht and what followed in its wake. But as a Christian involved in Jewish evangelism, I cannot brush this sickening thing aside and park it with the Christians of the past, many of whom – though not all – chose the part of the spectator.

In a sermon on November 13, 1938, Hans Fuglsang-Damgaard, bishop of Copenhagen, spoke sharply against what took place on Kristallnacht a few days before and expressed his solidarity with the Jewish Christians in Germany. Shortly thereafter, 149 of 190 pastors in the Danish Lutheran Church in Copenhagen signed a letter in which they gave expression to “their deep compassion with our Jewish countrymen on the occasion of the sufferings that in these days have befallen their compatriots elsewhere and which must fill all Christians with horror.” In an interview, the



bishop called the churches to pray for the suffering Jews on the following Sunday. From the bishop's archive material, it appears he believed that the church of Christ should teach neither anti-Semitism nor the superiority of the Aryan race.

The Danish Israel Mission also turned against what had happened. Articles in its magazine reported on the hardships of the Jews. On the front page of the January 1939 issue, the following headline can be seen: "The blazing fires in which the Jewish synagogues burned on November 10, 1938, will be remembered longer than those who lit the fires can imagine." The Danish Israel Mission, along with other organizations, organized a collection of money for Jewish refugees.

This, however, does not mean that everything was rosy in Denmark in those days. The bishop of Copenhagen, the Danish Israel Mission, and others who fought for the Jews and against anti-Semitism were contradicted by Danes of a different opinion.

Martin Schwarz Lausten, professor of church history at the University of Copenhagen, recounts this story in the book *Jødesympati og jødehad i folkekirken* (Sympathy with Jews, Hatred of Jews in the Danish Lutheran Church). The book appeared in 2007, and is the sixth and last volume of a comprehensive study of the relationship between Christians and Jews in Denmark from the Middle Ages till 1948 – a work of almost 3,500 pages in Danish.

In the last volume, the Danish Israel Mission is often mentioned. There is much criticism but also praise. The way I read the book, the criticism exceeds the praise – because the Danish Israel Mission, in these difficult times, adheres to its belief that Jews need Jesus for salvation.

An example of this is when Schwarz Lausten calls attention to the mission's appeal for prayer for the Jewish people in the autumn of 1939. This appeal contains a detailed description of the unfortunate consequences of the racial hatred of the Jews, and it concludes by asking what the Christians of Denmark can do. The answer is that "we" through mercy and intercession can show "our Jewish brothers" that anti-Semitism is a plant that does not belong in Denmark's garden, and that "racial hatred in any form is irreconcilable with living Christianity."

Having mentioned this appeal, Schwarz Lausten continues: "This glowing appeal cannot but have caused joy among Danish Jews." But then he notes that on the said prayer day, the Christians in Denmark were to pray for the Jews that God in his grace would turn all the evil so it would become a blessing for the Jews, for the Jews must know that we "are ready to share with them the best which we have, namely Jesus Christ and his redemptive work on Calvary."

This reflects, as Schwarz Lausten says elsewhere in the book, "the anti-Jewish rhetoric and theology" of the Danish Israel Mission. In other words: Prayer in the name of Jesus for suffering Jews is acceptable. Prayer in the name of Jesus that they may come to faith in Jesus reflects "anti-Jewish rhetoric and theology."

This is a logical short circuit that I cannot accept, and personally I prefer

living with that accusation rather than omit praying – and working – for the salvation of Jewish people.

Having said that, I am not unaffected by Schwarz Lausten's many examples of unpleasant generalizations about Jews and their religious worship and about God's judgment on them and their lives, and examples of well-meant explanations of the purpose of God's judgment, etc. I wish, however, that – to an even larger extent – he had compared such statements with what was said by Jews at the same time about, for example, the Jewish people's suffering and God's judgment. Without such comparison, the presentation becomes lopsided. But this does not change the fact that there are statements in magazines and publications from the mission whose chairman I am today that I must dissociate myself from, statements I would not let pass my lips.

I suppose the same is true about what has been written in the magazines of other Jewish missions over the last two centuries – or how? It does not matter whether it has been written by Christians or Jesus-believing Jews.

If this contention holds good, it is high time that we who are involved in Jewish evangelism scrutinize our own tradition critically – if we do not do so, it will be done by others who are unsympathetic to Jewish evangelism as such. If necessary, we ourselves must, in crystal clear terms, make it clear what we dissociate ourselves from in the way of generalizations, vocabulary, and tone, for example in the descriptions of Jews and Jewish worship in earlier mission literature. This should include a certain caution against determining in confident terms what is God's *purpose* with any event.

It must be possible to do that without abandoning our conviction that Jews need Jesus for salvation – as much as the rest of us.

I recently came across a challenging quotation by Henry Rasmussen, who had been sent by the Danish Israel Mission to work in Lwów (Lemberg in Eastern Poland) in 1938. He was in touch with some Jews who, in the 1930s, had been exiled from Germany. In the Danish Israel Mission's magazine (March 1940), Henry Rasmussen writes the following thought-provoking words:

The biggest disaster in this world is not really that they [the Jews] do not know Christ but rather that they think they know him, and it is the Christians among whom they live who are to blame for that. They think they know the spirit and thoughts of Christ, for surely that must be what dictates the conduct of the Christians. They think they know the New Testament! Everywhere on the house wall are slogans against Jews: "Bij Zyda" (Slay the Jew), "Zyd twój wróg" (The Jew is your enemy), "Precz z Zydami" (Down with the Jews) and many other things which they believe are quotations from the New Testament! They believe that Jesus is the Jews' enemy no. 1, the anti-Semites' anti-Semite. How should they be able to believe otherwise?

May we who continue to pray and work for the salvation of Israel in the name of Jesus make it crystal clear that Jesus is the Jews' *friend* no. 1.