



Excerpts from Dr. Bernhard Landau's eye-witness report "The hell of Sachsenhausen. My experiences after 10 November 1938".

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DIE HÖLLE VON SACHSENHAUSEN

MEINE ERLEBNISSE NACH DEM 10. NOVEMBER 1938

von

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Kempson

THE HELL OF SACHSENHAUSEN

MY EXPERIENCES AFTER 10 NOVEMBER 1938

by

Dr B. Landau (London)

I

When all the German press exploited the assassination by the young Jew Grienspan to attack the whole of Jewry in the most reckless way, we Jews in Germany were filled with serious concerns about the effects on us. Nobody was sure what would happen, we also knew that the people of Berlin would not resort to violence by themselves, but we also knew that the same people were capable of anything if it were ordered from above. On 9 November it now became known that Freiherr vom Rath, injured in Gruenspan's attack in Paris, had succumbed to his wounds. Thus the fears of Germany's Jews about the consequences of the attack reached a peak.

When I now stepped out onto the street on the early morning of 10 November – a peaceful residential street in western Berlin – I first saw that the shops marked out as "Jewish" had smashed windows, broken signs and destroyed displays. The "Jewish" shops had been marked out as such for some time now because the police had ordered that the name of the Jewish owner be prominently displayed in large white letters on the windows. This measure had been principally intended to ensure the permanent continuation of the compulsory boycott of Jewish shops. In fact, this led to a very large number of Jewish shops being forced into so-called Aryanisisation, e.g. the large department stores of Gruenfeld und Rosenhain and many others. In the course of this Aryanisisation, the former Jewish owners had their businesses removed under conditions that can only be characterised as "theft". In so far as these "sales" into Arian hands had yet to take place, so where these shops were marked out with white writing on the windows in accordance with the police regulations, they were demolished in the night of 9/10 November – all of them, without exception.

As this had been done in the short space of time from about 2 to 5 in the morning, a very large number of columns of destruction must have been deployed just in Berlin. An eye-witness reported to me that he had watched the destruction of the Markgraf's jewellers in Tauentzienstrasse in Berlin. A lorry pulled up with a trailer, laden with a number of young lads. They were wearing civilian coats and hats, but you could see beneath the coats the brown trousers and long boots that characterised them as members of a National Socialist organisation; they obviously belonged to the (NSKK) National Socialist Motor Corps, to whom the campaign of destruction had probably been assigned because they had the necessary vehicles to carry it out quickly. These lads, who were equipped with long bars, now jumped down from the lorry, and one went over to the constable standing on the corner of Tauentzienstrasse and Nürnbergerstrasse on traffic duty. He showed him a sheet of paper, on which there was clearly a list of Jewish businesses, and which probably also contained an order to the constable not to prevent the destruction of these shops. After he'd read the paper, he then did his duty and turned around while the lads used the bars to destroy the shop's window, display, door and signs. A few steps further on, the same thing happened at a ladies' wear shop. Here, the lads throw the coats on display out onto the street, where they could not get them onto the lorry in their haste. One of the lads said to a woman who came past: "Hey, grandma, take this, here's a coat, you could use it." But the poor-looking woman walked on and said: "No, I don't take coats like that."

As I walked through West Berlin, I could now confirm the terrible destruction of the night before at every shop and café marked as Jewish; no pane of glass, no door, no sign remained

intact. The owners of the shops were naturally nowhere to be seen, any more than the staff, the shops were all shut, as were the few Jewish cafés and restaurants, which had also been demolished.

[...]

Just after 4 o'clock, my older brother rang me and asked if everything was all right with me. We were particularly careful at that time because it was known that telephone conversations were frequently listened to. So I took his question to be referring to a possible attack on my flat and answered that I was all right.

I had barely ended the telephone conversation and continued a letter I had begun typing when my doorbell rang. I have a door opener connected to the telephone with which you can find out from the flat door who is at the main door downstairs. So I asked, as I usually do, who was there, and received the answer that they wanted to speak to Dr Landau. When I asked what it was about, I was told that two good friends of Dr Landau were downstairs, I just needed to let them in. I pressed the door opener and a few moments later two officers in civilian clothes entered my flat. Their identification discs showed them to be members of the Gestapo. They asked me if I was Dr Bernhard Landau and when I gave a positive answer, they declared me under arrest. I still wanted to know on what grounds this was happening and what they had against me. They answered "There is nothing against you, you are being arrested as part of a larger campaign."

They then said I should get ready quickly and come with them.

My poor boy was standing there, white as a sheet, but they said they had only arrested me. I had just enough time to change my smoking jacket for the one for my suit. My boy ran downstairs at incredible speed and got me a piece of sausage and a few bread rolls. Out of breath and pale, he raced upstairs again and handed me the food. After asking the officers, I also pocketed about RM 24 and then said an affectionate goodbye to my boy without knowing what would now happen to me. I only told him to hold his head high and remain loyal to me, just as I would never, never leave him. So I walked out of my flat with the letter I'd begun still in my typewriter and went down the stairs with the two Gestapo men towards an unknown fate.

In the street I walked between the two officers and noticed that there were several other escorts of this kind on their way. Everyone on the street was very excited, I also saw little groups of people, probably discussing their experiences. When I noticed that the Gestapo men were watching me very carefully as we crossed the Kaiserallee, I told them they needn't be afraid, I wouldn't run as I knew there would be no point. They either could not or would not give me an answer to the question of what would happen to me now, they only said they were to deliver me to the police headquarters at Alexanderplatz.

I then referred to my war service and complained that this was the kind of thanks I could expect from the Fatherland. The rather older Gestapo officer could understand my feelings, but the younger one only said that everyone would have to suffer now, Herr von Rath couldn't help it either that the Jew boy had shot him.

I engaged in no further discussion and was handed over by the two officers to a uniformed policeman in a room at the police station responsible for me, with the information that they would be back for me later. In the room were another 10-14 Jewish gentlemen who shared the same fate as me. The policeman just noted my name and place and date of birth on a sheet of paper. After about an hour, it might have been 6 in the afternoon by then, another Gestapo man in civvies came to fetch me. I followed him across Uhlandstrasse to another police station in Sächsische Strasse, where yet another group of Jewish men were detained in a room, in which an unordered list of those present was being kept by the policeman in charge.

Individuals from among those detained were constantly being fetched by Gestapo men in civvies and crossed off the list of those present. I have to say that the officer in charge of the Sächsische Strasse station behaved obligingly, he permitted a brief conversation with the agitated and crying women, who must have learnt of the arrests of their husbands and now found them at the police station. He also permitted them to give a little food and cigarettes to their arrested husbands. This humane police superintendent also allowed telephone conversations, because many had been taken away so suddenly from their homes that they hadn't even been able to make arrangements for the keys, and their relatives who had been out weren't even able to get back into their locked flats. So they were trying to get hold of someone on the telephone to inform him and where possible to make other important arrangements. That was generally far from easy, because, frightened by the mass arrests, everyone had fled their homes and was wandering around on the streets.

I was also allowed to make a phone call from this police station. I wanted to reassure my son about my preliminary fate. But it was the same for me as most of the others, I could get through to nobody at home, because my boy too had sensibly left the flat and was trying to warn other people of our acquaintance about the arrest.

At about seven in the evening, the same two Gestapo men who had arrested me in my flat appeared at the police station. They demanded that I came with them and told me that they now had to take me to the police headquarters. When I wanted to take a taxi-cab there, they told me I would have to pay for it myself. I then said that I wasn't in that much of a hurry, besides which I had a season ticket for the underground railway, which would take us from Fehrbelliner Platz to Alexanderplatz just as comfortably. So we took the underground and the officers complained to me about how much work they had with all these arrests. They had been on the go since 6 in the morning and had barely eaten. They then allowed me to make another telephone call from the Alexanderplatz station. But this was also in vain, nobody answered at home. I then asked the friendlier of the two officers if he would later call my son to reassure him about my fate and to tell him not to look for me at first because it would be pointless. He promised to do it and took 10 pfennigs for the cost of the telephone conversation from me. It may be that he did indeed attempt the call that evening, but my boy, as I said, came home very late that evening, so that might be the reason that the message never got through.

From the underground, I now walked between the officers the short distance along Alexanderstrasse and saw the terrible excitement of passers-by. Opposite the entrance to the police headquarters, the pavement was full of people, most of whom were unhappy and crying women. Now I walked through the door of the police headquarters still towards an uncertain future.

Source: Wiener Library London, 058-EA-1279.