BBC iWonder

How did one Englishman save 669 children from the Holocaust?

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Lives in Danger - Kristallnacht: video transcript

Throughout the 1930s anti-Semitism had been on the rise in Germany. Nazi laws had stripped Jews of their civil liberties. The party created a climate in which ordinary Germans boycotted Jewish businesses and ostracized those who had once been friends and neighbours. But many in the Nazi party wanted to take things further.

In late 1938 a German diplomat was shot by an exiled Polish Jew in Paris. The diplomat died on November 9th. What then followed was a night of violence against Jews in the German occupied territories. Hundreds of synagogues were burned and thousands of Jewish businesses targeted. At least 91 Jews were killed.

Nazi leaders seized on the opportunity to pass off the attacks as a spontaneous outpouring of public sentiment. In fact the violence was organised by party officials. Many of the perpetrators were Nazi Storm Troopers or members of the Hitler Youth wearing civilian clothes. Fire crews looked on as the synagogues burned stepping in only when surrounding buildings were threatened. The windows of over 7,500 Jewish businesses were smashed – as a result the riots were given the name Kristallnacht or Crystal Night.

Up to 30,000 Jews were then rounded up and sent to local prisons and concentration camps. Nearly all of them were released after a few weeks if they signed a declaration that they would leave the country. This marked the first mass internment of people based solely on their Jewish background. It offered a clear signal to the Nazi government that the German people were willing to tolerate a new level of anti-Jewish persecution. The message to Jews was also clear –things were going to get worse and now was the time to try and flee the Third Reich. If they couldn't leave themselves then they would make every effort to organise an escape for their children.