

Mrs. Ruth Oppenheim
“Remembering Kristallnacht 80 Years On”

Mrs. Ruth Oppenheim is a Holocaust survivor, educator, and author. She was eleven years old at the time of Kristallnacht (The Night of Broken Glass) which took place on November 9th and 10th, 1938. During less than 48 hours, in a series of coordinated attacks instigated and organized by the Nazi regime, rioters burned or destroyed 267 synagogues, vandalized or looted 7,500 Jewish businesses, and killed at least 91 Jewish citizens.¹ Jewish cemeteries, hospitals, schools, and homes were destroyed as police and fire brigades stood aside and as many as 30,000 Jews were arrested, some of whom were later transferred to concentration camps. The events of Kristallnacht are viewed as a major turning point in the Nazi policies that culminated in the mass genocide of Jewish communities in Germany and elsewhere during WWII.

Mrs. Oppenheim’s own family was a victim of the violence during Kristallnacht. As a child in their hometown of Werne, Germany, the family watched as her father was dragged from their home in the middle of the night and taken away with other Jewish residents of the town. He returned hours later, beaten and bloody and carrying the Torah (Jewish Bible) from the community’s synagogue. The experience led the family to flee Germany and seek refuge in the United States, however, they were unable to travel together as a family. Mrs. Oppenheim’s elder sister fled in May 1939 followed by her father in August 1939. After the war began in September 1939, Mrs. Oppenheim and her mother and two other siblings did not reach the US until January 1940.

The family settled in Washington Heights, New York where many German Jews rebuilt their lives during and after the war. Mrs. Oppenheim went on to raise her own family and pursue a successful career in various educational institutions. She served fifteen years as department manager for the Brown University’s Department of English and another six years in the Office of the Dean of the College. She has additionally worked as a research assistant for Harvard’s German Department. Mrs. Oppenheim holds an AA from the Harvard Extension School and has authored her memoir titled *Beyond Survival: The Story of My Life*.

¹ Many sources cite much higher numbers. The above figures are taken from “Kristallnacht” The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, <https://www.ushmm.org/information/exhibitions/online-exhibitions/special-focus/kristallnacht>.