

Murder in Pr. Holland

I was close to nine when an event happened in Pr. Holland that stunned and shocked us all. Father came home that evening very upset. He said that an eighteen-year-old boy, a clerk in a store in the center of town, had been attacked by a gang and was not expected to live.

Crime was unheard of in Pr. Holland. Nobody locked their doors. We did not have a town jail, only the old prisoner-of-war camp that dated back to World War I and was never used. Nothing like this had ever occurred in Pr. Holland, as far as anyone remembered.

The attack gained nationwide attention. It was reported in the Berlin newspaper. It was reported on the radio.

“Arthur Knopf has been stabbed by Hitlerist high-school students in the town of Preussisch-Holland, in East Prussia, while they were going through the streets in demonstration. Knopf is in a critical condition and is not expected to live. On being arrested, the students said that they stabbed him because they don’t like Jews.”

Jewish Telegraphic Agency, Berlin, March 18, 1931

This certainly caught our attention. Mother turned to me with a look of alarm. Father said not to worry. It had nothing to do with our family. We didn’t even know the Knopf family.

That incident in 1931 was when I first learned that there was a long history in Germany of hating the Jews. Some people held strong feelings about Jews, blaming them for everything imaginable that was wrong, much stronger than the stuff that was playground banter.

This was the first time I learned that there were people who thought Jews were their enemy. I had heard kids say many things about Jews. Kids talked about the Poles in much the same way. But I never thought that meant anything. This was harmless conversation. That was just the way some of my friends talked. Some kids make fun of others. They were just repeating what they heard others say. Cruel and stupid? Of course. Dangerous? No. Now I know better. Now I know that it was dangerous. Behavior like that can never be tolerated and can never be condoned. Then, when I was nine, I had no idea what this kind of talk really meant.

I certainly had no idea why some people would physically harm someone because they were Jewish. To be honest, I had never thought about the possibility. My sense of enemies or opponents was limited to childhood games on the playground or in the backyard. It is difficult to remember what a nine-year-old thinks, but clearly, a nine-year-old thinks more than a parent might know.

From my observations of the synagogue and my church, I knew that a few people were Jewish and most others were not. I knew that my cousin Heinz in Leisnig was Jewish. He had told me he

celebrated Hanukkah. I knew we celebrated Christmas and that he did not. I remember listening closely, probably because it had something to do with presents. Some things don't change. Kids have their priorities.

By then, I knew that Mother had grown up in a Jewish family. So what? Everyone had parents, and they all grew up in families. This was not something significant. There was never a time that we denied our Jewish ancestry. It was not something avoided. It was simply a topic that rarely came up. It was neither a family secret nor a family discussion. As for religion, we were Lutherans. As for ancestry, we were what we were. Father had always been a Lutheran. Mother had become a Lutheran. My sisters and I were Lutherans. The synagogue held no part of our life, and we didn't follow any Jewish customs or celebrate Jewish holidays. Our religion was not Jewish.

I need to be careful about the impressions I create. Religion was never a bible-thumping theme in our family. Faith was not something we ordinarily spoke about or discussed. We never wore our religion on our sleeves. I suppose, like so many others, we went through the motions and gave lip service to certain beliefs. It is true that we felt informed by our faith and we respected many of its customs and beliefs. I was baptized and confirmed, we attended church services, we typically said grace with our meals, and I was taught to say my prayers. But there were seven days in every week, and church held our attention for only a brief part of one morning. Most of our religion was about caring, kindness, giving, being considerate, and respecting others. I believe our family was like that, and in that regard, we were a very typical German, small-town family.

I can't be certain if the murder that year in Pr. Holland caused Mother and me to have a conversation about hatred and prejudice, but we must have talked about it at that time. Perhaps I wondered whether Mother might be in danger because she had been Jewish. I can't recall if the subject was the sensationalism of there being a murder in our small town or the fact that someone was attacked and killed because they were Jewish. I just know that is when I started to think of things a bit differently. I knew one thing for certain. This had nothing to do with me.

These were the years when Mother and I would visit while I ate dinner, when Father often didn't get home until late in the evening, after I was in my room or in bed. Any conversation about our Jewish roots would have been with Mother. These were not matters Father and I discussed, ever. He had no interest. And, even with Mother, the conversation would have been brief.

Mother would have told me we should be tolerant of everyone. We all have similarities. We all have differences. We respect everyone. Educated people do not act this way. Bad, stupid people had committed this horrible crime. They would be caught, and their punishment would be severe. She would have told me not to worry. Jewish ancestry or not, we were Germans, first and foremost. That's what mattered.

Certainly, the murder would be something that would be talked about among my friends. Nine-year-old kids talked about everything, and we would have all talked about this. It was big news. It

happened in our home town. It was in the newspaper and on the radio. We all knew the store where it had happened. The adults all said it was the first murder anyone ever remembered taking place in Pr. Holland.

I am sure each of my friends claimed to know someone who marched in the demonstration, someone involved in the case, or to have special knowledge about a particular fact. We would all listen intently as details were unveiled. We would all voice our opinions.

I am not sure whether we talked about Jews too. We might have. We all knew that Jews were different from us, just like the Poles. That was what everyone said. They went to the synagogue. My friends and I all went to the church. That was common knowledge. I suppose it's possible that one of my friends would have made a disparaging remark about Jews. Kids do tend to repeat what their parents or older siblings say, often without a clue as to what it might mean. I knew enough not to be entirely comfortable with these conversations. But I had no desire to distance myself from my friends. All the kids ran together as a pack, and I was part of the pack.

It is also entirely possible that I repeated something one of my friends said and my parents heard me. But I doubt it. I had been raised to be polite, and polite people did not make disparaging remarks about anyone. Certainly, that would have triggered a conversation with Mother and, more than likely, been grounds for a mouth washed with soap, something threatened from time to time and that I had successfully avoided.

What didn't really connect for me was that my family fell in the category of the Jews that were in the center of this storm. I thought those were others. Soon, I was to learn that they were us.

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