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Early warning: genocide prevention through the eyes of my grandparents

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In the middle of the night, in late October 1938, my grandparents, Schlips and Hela Binder, heard a loud banging on the door of their Leipzig apartment. They were presented with expulsion orders and given only minutes to prepare, before being forced to leave their home and belongings. Then they were marched into Poland. The Germans subjected the thousands of deportees to beatings and fired shots in the air to frighten them into walking faster over the border. It was what we now know as the Polenaktion or the Zbaszyn deportation, when Jews of Polish background were expelled, and it took place just over a week before *Kristallnacht*.

My grandfather Schlips* was so nicknamed because it was the slang term for his surname Binder, or necktie in English, and because he had the misfortune of having the same first name as the newly elected leader of Germany. In the years prior to their deportation, the persecution of Jews had become ever more severe. Schlips had been warned by the boss at the department store where he worked as a buyer of curtains and carpets, that his employment would not last much longer.

And then, one of their friends disappeared. A week later, his mother received a package in the post, containing his ashes.

It was these events in the late 1930's that compelled Schlips and his wife, my grandmother, Hela, to look for a place to emigrate, and to buy tickets for a ship travelling to Australia – the country farthest away from Europe on the globe. But that fateful night a week before Kristallnacht, their boat tickets were confiscated by the Nazis, along with everything else they owned and loved.

Schlips and Hela had recognised the early warning signs of an impending genocide, though a word for what was to happen to Europe's Jews had not yet been coined, and the crime would not be outlawed until 1948, after 6 million Jews had been murdered.

In the field of atrocity prevention, where I work, much of our effort goes into early warning, into monitoring and assessing the risk of atrocity crimes. Because, as former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon noted, genocide

doesn't happen randomly or spontaneously. It's a process, like the one that happened in 1930's Germany, the increasing persecution, degradation and dehumanisation that my grandparents endured leading up to Kristallnacht, and culminating in the Holocaust.

We have a United Nations document that we use to analyse the risk of atrocities, called the Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Prevention. In it, there are 14 risk factors, each of which contains a number of specific indicators. I refer to them frequently in my work, but for the first time, I have looked at them through the eyes of Hela and Schlips, to see what they saw, what they lived through, and what they lived **with** for the rest of their lives.

Some of the risk factors are underlying or structural in nature, such as Risk factor 1, which refers to social, political and economic instability in a society, caused for example, by growing nationalist movements, severe political repression, identity-based tensions, or a severe crisis in the national economy. All of these were present in 1930's Germany.

The financial crisis that hit Germany post WWI and hyperinflation that saw Germans push wheelbarrows of money to the shops to buy a loaf of bread, needed a scapegoat. Longstanding antisemitism and the idea that Jews were a fifth column, along with resentment about the perception of Jews having cultural and financial prominence, meant they were easy to blame. The economic instability and post-WWI loss of territory and national pride partly led to the rise of an authoritarian leader who promised to be Germany's salvation. The creation of an 'enemy', one that was seen to have stabbed Germans in the back, was crucial.

Risk factor 4 highlights a perceived threat posed by the targeted or so-called protected group, including perceptions of disloyalty to a cause, along with ideologies based on the supremacy of a certain identity.

Hitler's speeches and propaganda about Jews not only portrayed them as sub-human and a threat to the purity of the German race, but as the cause of Germany's crisis. As early as 1919 he had referred to Jews as a racial tuberculosis. Hela and Schlips would have seen the ubiquitous Nazi posters, news articles and other propaganda attacking their community, and they would have heard Hitler's calls for the annihilation of world Jewry.

Risk factor 10 refers to official documents, political manifests, media records, or any other documentation through which a direct intent, or incitement, to

target a protected group based on its national, ethnic, racial or religious identity is revealed.

My grandparents, like all Jews in Nazi Germany, were at the receiving end of increasing human rights violations, and the adoption of discriminatory measures or legislation, two early warning signs described in the framework of analysis for atrocity prevention.

In 1933, the Nazis passed a Law excluding Jews from public service positions and disbaring non-Aryan lawyers. Also that year began the process of marginalisation of Jews from Leipzig's public schools, with a Directive from the Saxon ministry for popular education, and finally in 1935, the expulsion of all Jewish students. The following year, with segregation of Aryans and Jews in schools achieved, students in Leipzig were told "to hold their nose if they meet a Jew in the street, because the Jews stink fearfully."

Jews were also banned from obtaining doctorate degrees, and there were quotas on Jews attending university. This prevented my grandfather from studying his desired vocation, optometry. By 1938, 1,600 Jewish businesses in Leipzig had been "aryanized". The large department store where Schlips worked, which he later described as making Macy's in New York look like a corner store, could no longer employ Jews.

Hela and Schlips may still have been able to stroll through the Rosenthal, the city's large green park, or rest on its benches. But unbeknownst to them, local Germans were complaining that "every Jew insists that the greatest number of the benches be taken for the sons and daughters of Israel, and they do not budge when "Aryans" want to take a spot." After Kristallnacht a letter was published in the newspaper titled "They're still sitting there!" (*exclamation mark*) the author astonished that Jews had the *chutzpah* to continue sitting on park benches even after the warning of the 1938 pogrom.

The 1935 Nuremberg Race Laws aimed to enshrine the Nazis' views on the superiority of the Aryan race and the sub-human nature of the Jews, into law. The Reich Citizenship Law stripped Jews of German citizenship, and of political rights. My grandparents were now stateless, until they were defined to be Polish, and expelled. Later laws relied on the definition of "Jew" as defined in the Nuremberg Laws, including the 1938 law to alter the names of Jews, to invalidate their passports and require new ones to record the letter "J" for Jude, and finally in 1941, the requirement to wear a yellow Star of David.

These all align with risk factor 7 in the early warning framework, which includes the marking of people or property based on their identity. That same risk factor lists inflammatory rhetoric, propaganda campaigns or hate speech as precursors to atrocity crimes.

By 1938, the German population had been exposed for several years to antisemitic cartoons in *Der Sturmer*, to films portraying Aryans as a superior race and Jews as vermin, and racist propaganda was especially used in periods where legislation was being introduced to discriminate against Jews. As the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum explains, this had the effect of encouraging passivity and acceptance of such measures against Jews among the broader population. The lack of a free media – another marker for the likelihood of atrocities, meant that the Nazis could promote their ideology without opposition. From 1933, journalists had to have an Aryan certificate, and were directly accountable to the Ministry of Propaganda.

Risk factor 5 highlights the capacity to encourage or recruit large numbers of supporters and mobilise them, along with a strong culture of obedience to authority. The SS who banged on my grandparents' door that night in October, evicting them from their apartment and their country, did not question the order to deport Jews of Polish background or to prohibit them from taking anything more than 10 Deutschmarks with them. The mobs who attacked Jewish businesses, homes, and synagogues a week later on Kristallnacht, were effectively mobilised by antisemitism and a commitment to Nazi ideology, to cause widespread destruction. When they humiliated Jews in the streets, cutting their beards, making them crawl like animals, when they burnt down synagogues, they were engaging in risk factors 10 and 13, practices of violence that dehumanise a group, cause humiliation, fear or terror; along with the seizure, pillaging or destruction of civilian property that represents the cultural, social or religious identity of the protected group.

The framework of analysis seems so abstract, the language so cold. Looking at it through my grandparents' eyes, that "protected group" that it speaks of - that was us, our families, our community. And we were not protected. When my grandparents were among the first Jews to be expelled from Germany in October 1938, the early warning indicator that refers to the deportation, segregation and forced displacement of the targeted group had become a reality, forever changing the trajectory of their lives, and mine. And for 6 years after that, Jews across Europe were segregated, deported, herded into concentration camps, and annihilated.

It turns out there is a direct link between the Polenaktion and Kristallnacht. Among those deported to Zbaszyn, Poland, was a family called Grynszpan, one of whom managed to write to a brother, Heschel, who lived in Paris, describing what had happened. Heschel was furious about his family's treatment, and partly it drove him to shoot the German diplomat Ernst vom Rath. This incident provided a pretext for the Nazis to launch the Kristallnacht pogroms, already in planning, awaiting a trigger.

But Hela and Schlips were no longer in Germany to witness this desecration of Jewish Leipzig. When they arrived in Poland, a local Jewish man saw Schlips holding a Siddur and took them in. Over the coming months, they fled from town to town and eventually managed to smuggle themselves to Holland. Living on soup made from fish bones collected at the wharves, Schlips went every week to the shipping company and the local Jewish welfare committee to try to get passage to Australia. Hela played poker in the cafes for small amounts of food money. Later, in Australia, she only played canasta, gin rummy and scrabble, never poker.

Eventually they secured passage on a ship called the Strathnaver, and despite the Dutch Nazi standing guard at the entrance, they were able to board, and the ship arrived in Australia on 8 August 1939, just weeks before the outbreak of WWII.

My grandparents escaped. Many of their friends and relatives didn't. And they lived with terrible survivor guilt for the remainder of their lives.

In 1949, Hela reflected on the 10 years since they had been on the boat with other Jews who were lucky enough to get out on that last ship to Australia before the war.

Well, my friends (she wrote) ten years have passed
Since like that, we've been together last.
And, I hope you will agree
That more than grateful we all have to be.
None has forgotten the hard and bitter first years
The worries, and struggles, the setbacks and tears.
And yet, how lucky, compared with millions of others
Who can forget our murdered sisters and brothers.

Early warning of genocide is of no use if there isn't the political will to take action. When there are early warning signs, precursors, indicators that a genocide may occur, the international community has an obligation to act. Time and time again, we see states fail to protect populations from atrocities.

If there's anything we should be reminded of when we commemorate Kristallnacht, it's that the violence unleashed by the Nazis on 9 November 1938 was not spontaneous, but was the result of action taken throughout the 1930's and even earlier. The creation of ghettos and the deportation of Jews did not happen overnight; nor were concentration camps and their gas chambers built without extensive planning and implementation. The genocide of Europe's Jews, like all genocides, took place over time, a progression of small steps, ostracism from broader society, hate speech and dehumanisation, discriminatory pieces of legislation, growing acceptance of, and participation in, brutality by the population, political and civil rights stripped away, the stealing of property, and destruction of sacred buildings.

Kristallnacht is a reminder that not only must we be conscious of the warning signs, but the international community must **act** to prevent further escalation and ultimately, to protect our fellow human beings from genocide.

*Schlips later changed his name formally to Alan.

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