

READING

A Family Responds to Kristallnacht

Marie Kahle (a teacher), her husband (a university professor and Lutheran pastor), and their sons witnessed the events of Kristallnacht in the city of Bonn and the effects those events had on their Jewish neighbors and colleagues. Marie Kahle wrote about the choices she and her family made the next day:

On 10 November, 1938, at 11:30 in the morning, the wife of a Jewish colleague came to me and reported that both the synagogues in Bonn had been set on fire and that SS men had destroyed the Jewish shops, to which I replied: "That can't be true!" She gave me a manuscript to keep, her husband's life work. Then one of my sons brought the same news.

My third son immediately went, without my knowing it, to a Jewish clockmaker's shop, helped the man's wife hide a few things and brought home a chest with the most valuable jewelry and time-pieces. Then he went to a chocolate shop, warned the owner and helped her move tea, coffee, cocoa, etc. to a room in the very back of the building. While three SS men were destroying everything in the front of the shop, he slipped out the back door with a suitcase full of securities and rode home with it on his bicycle. Later on, he spent weeks selling these hidden things to our acquaintances and thus made money for the two shop owners that the Gestapo knew nothing about. A Jewish colleague of my husband's stayed with us all day long on 10 November and thus avoided being arrested.

From 11 November on, my sons worked furiously to help the Jewish shopkeepers clear out their shops. I couldn't take part in this myself because I did not want to endanger my husband's position. I could only visit the poor people. During one of these visits, my eldest son and I were surprised by a policeman, who wrote down my name. The consequence was a newspaper article . . . for 17 November 1938 headed "This is a betrayal of the people: Frau Kahle and her son help the Jewess Goldstein clear out."

On the basis of this newspaper article, my husband was immediately suspended and he was forbidden to enter . . . the university buildings. My eldest son was also forbidden to enter the university. He was convicted by a disciplinary court. . . . During the night, our house was attacked. Window panes were broken, etc. . . . The police came a short time later but went away again immediately. One of the policemen advised me to look out into

the street: there, we found written in large red letters on the pavement: "Traitors to the People! Jew-lovers!" We washed the writing away with turpentine.

However, since the people were constantly coming back in their car, I openly rode away on my bicycle. I did not want to be beaten to death in front of my children and I was also only a danger to my family. I found shelter in a small Catholic convent, where the nuns were kind enough to look after me and my youngest child. During the interrogation by the Gestapo a few days later, I was asked whether I knew the license number of the car whose occupants had made the attack. When I said "no", I was released. As I came out of the Gestapo building, this same car stood in front of the door. I even recognized the driver.

Particularly important in this whole period was a visit in 1939 by a well-known neurologist who, as Reich Education Director . . . was well up on Jewish matters. He told me, on two afternoons when we were alone, what would happen to me and my family along the lines of "Jews and friends of Jews must be exterminated. We are exterminating friends of Jews and all their offspring." Then he said that I could not be saved, but my family could. When I asked what I should do, he gave his answer in the form of a couple of stories in which the wife committed suicide and thereby saved her family. Then he asked: "How much Veronal [a sleeping pill] do you have?" When I answered, "Only two grams," he wrote me a prescription for the quantity that I was lacking. I carried the Veronal around with me for a few days, but then decided not to die, but instead to try to escape abroad with my family.

In four months, only three of my husband's colleagues dared to visit us. I was not allowed to go out during the day. When one evening I met a colleague's wife and complained that no friends or acquaintances had dared to visit me, she said: "That's not cowardice; we are just facing facts."¹

Soon after, the family left Germany.

¹ Marie Kahle, in *The Night of Broken Glass: Eyewitness Accounts of Kristallnacht*, ed. Uta Gerhardt and Thomas Karlauf (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012), 88–90. Reproduced by permission from Polity Press.

Connection Questions

1. What did members of the Kahle family do to help their Jewish neighbors in the days after Kristallnacht? How might you describe their roles? Were they bystanders? Upstanders?
2. What were the risks and consequences of the Kahles' actions? According to Marie Kahle's account, did they stop to consider the possible consequences before acting?