The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Program

RETROSPECTIVE
ROBERT H. HARLAN

Memoir

Image: Das Stelenfeld, Berlin 2006

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from contemporary diary entries and letters written by Bob Harlan.

RETROSPECTIVE

On November 9th and 10th in 1938, a pogrom (a planned extermination sanctioned by the German government and directed against an ethnic group) began and moved through cities in Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia. Germans and Storm Troopers smashed the windows of Jewish homes and shops, burned the synagogues, ravaged businesses, condoned muggings, and carried out humiliating, random arrests. They enforced numerous new laws prohibiting Jews from practicing their professions or accessing public areas. This terror is remembered as "Kristal Nacht," the Night of Broken Glass.

In the morning, the streets were covered with shards of broken glass. Jewish men, women and children had been beaten, imprisoned, and/or killed. Thirty thousand Jewish men were taken to concentration camps. 1,668 synagogues were ransacked or set on fire. This marked the beginning of a public campaign to eliminate Jews and those not considered 'normal' from Germany and German territories.

On the fringes of this event was a twenty-one year-old American college student from Freeport, Illinois: Robert H. Harlan. Before Bob left the United States, sounds of war were already echoing in Europe. After Germany seized Austria, Hitler demanded protection for all Auslandsdeutsch (Germans living outside Germany), and then the Czech crisis began. To try to avoid war, Great Britain and France met Hitler in Munich and agreed to Hitler's demands to cede the Sudetenland to Germany. Bob would witness "Kristal Nacht," the next step on the road to World War II.

Bob left his home in Freeport, Illinois for Montreal via the Saint Lawrence River. There he got a place on a freighter going to Germany where he was to be an exchange student at the University of Marburg (Phillips University) in Hamburg. Needing to improve his German, Bob bought a bike. Then, staying in youth-hostels with his bike, he rode down to Munich for a six-week orientation program.

Bob was in Marburg studying on November 10th when Kristal Nacht occurred. In a letter to his parents, he writes about the local synagogue burning, but he had no clear explanation of events. He mentioned being surprised by strangers on the street apologizing for what had happened. In late 1939, after his return to the United States, Bob tried to put together the pieces of his experience and the event. Looking back, we know what happened after the notes were made. Bob Harlan, however, had no idea of the horror story the world had begun to write. In later years, Bob expressed no desire to change his youthful memories or opinions.

SEPTEMBER 1938

In Chicago, Bob had met a young German student who asked him to visit his parents in Wurzburg. Late in August, Bob contacted the family and said he was passing through Wurzburg and hoped to be able to visit during the afternoon of Tuesday, September 6th. He left Marburg and after six days of cycling he arrived in Frankfurt on Monday, September 5th just sixty-five miles away from his required social call. Everyone at the youth hostel warned him about the roads and said the trip from Frankfurt to Wurzburg was an arduous one. Quite smug, after six days of cycling, Bob felt himself equal to anything central Germany had to offer. Bob set off Tuesday morning. He struggled almost immediately with hills, mud, rain, more hills, more mud, road repairs, and an agonizing amount of Gegenwind that blasts into you until you want to radically change your plans so that you can ride where the wind is at your back.

Bob wobbled into Wurzburg about three or four hours behind schedule, mud spattered and wearing a fetching pair of ragged, striped seersucker pants that were thoroughly

drenched. The seersucker pants were the chosen bad weather bike riding attire until Bob discovered they closely resembled German prison attire and discarded them. He could not find the youth hostel to clean himself up but, tired beyond understanding, he decided to make his social call and then find a hotel.

Image: Looking down the Main River, 2006

He staggered with soaked bike and bag to the gate of a lovely summer home on a hill looking down on the Main River. He jingled the bell. After a moment, Frau Stern appeared and looked him up and down while asking if he could possibly be who she thought he was. He admitted his identity and, without even blinking, she led him to the yard, showed him where to leave his bike, and took him straight into the most beautiful bathroom with the most beautiful tub he had ever seen. Frau Stern started the hot water. It had a musical sound to his tired grimy ears. Then she took Bob upstairs where there was the most wonderful little room with the most wonderful soft bed with nice clean sheets and a view across the river valley. This was to be his room.

If he had not been so weary, he might have objected out of politeness. As it was, he stood there flabbergasted --not having the slightest idea what to say as Frau Stern trotted off. For the next half hour, he soaked in hot water and after much scrubbing emerged feeling halfway respectable. He shaved and slipped into semi—clean but wadded up clothes. He went in search of Frau Stern and found her in the living room having a late coffee with Frau Schwartz, her English teacher.

Not having eaten anything since breakfast, Bob was ravenous. Although he prided himself on his restraint, he was invited to sit at the coffee table. Later, Frau Stern said that she had never seen so much food disappear so quickly into the mouth of one person. Between bites they chatted haltingly about his fourteen-day trip from Montreal to Hamburg to Marburg. (Bob could have traveled on Canadian Pacific Steamships.) Thanks

to the fluent English of the ladies, conversation proceeded in a friendly manner.

Soon it was dinnertime and Bob was introduced to Herr Dr. Stern, a tall, powerful man in his sixties still in peak condition. As a partner in an excellent law firm and a former city council member, he was a respected member of the community. Almost as soon as they met, he said defiantly and proudly, "Herr Harlan, we are Jews. The present government is not friendly to Jewish people. Perhaps it would be better if you went on. Although we would very much like you to stay, we will understand if you wish to leave." Although Bob could not pretend to be heroic, he did not hesitate to stay. Who was he but a politically naive young man to pass up free room and board plus an opportunity to learn how the internal situation in Germany appeared from the other side.

Dinner was the first of a series of delicious meals, planned by Frau Stern and prepared by their devoted and pure Aryan maid of some thirty odd years. Her name was Anna, and she had been their children's nanny. As a result of her deep devotion to the family, she spent all the few months that Bob knew her in sorrow and despair.

Shortly after dinner, Herr Stern sent Bob to bed where his last thought as he crawled into the clean sheets was to scrawl, "It's wonderful" in his journal. After twelve hours of sleep, there began ten days of loafing with a little sightseeing, hiking, and biking in the countryside with Bruno, a cousin of Frau Stern's. A man of about forty, Bruno had been the owner of a once thriving factory that was now restricted to making family boxes. These were tremendous piano sized cases used to transport the possessions of families lucky enough to emigrate. Bruno had served in the German army and had spent some time in a British prison camp. Every once in a while he would blurt out a phrase like "bloody fool."

Bob's German was improving under the daily tutelage of Frau Stern. He was set to translating a simple German book. In the evening, Herr Stern led conversations about many topics, always ending with a quote from Goethe. Herr Stern also spoke French, but his attempts at English usually ended in French that substituted for the German. One night they celebrated Bruno's birthday with a cobwebbed covered bottle of wine from the cellar that had been put down at a wedding many years ago.

Wednesday, September 7th was to be Bob's last day, but it was marred by a communication Herr Stern received at his office. "You must sell your house. As soon as you know the name of the purchaser and the purchase price, all must be reported to me. Since I already have a possible buyer, you will report to my office soon. If you do not do this, I may be forced to take further steps." The sender, some petty official, was contacting a prominent lawyer, a leading citizen, the former holder of several prominent municipal positions, winner of numerous honors in the past war, and a cultivated gentleman. It was with the contents of this note ringing in his ears that Bob peddled away south headed for Munich and Gemulichkiet.

OCTOBER 1938

During his stay in Munich, Bob saw the Sterns once. They had been on vacation in the mountains when Herr Doctor Stern fell ill. He had ten hours without medical treatment. They came to Munich to consult with a doctor about a possible operation. The Munich specialist however only prescribed rest and diet. On his way back to Marburg at the end of the month to settle in for the winter semester, Bob stopped for a luncheon at their city apartment that was connected to the law firm offices. After lunch, he accompanied Frau Stern on a shopping trip and discovered the 'tax' placed on all purchases by Jews. "Very simple to calculate," Frau Stern told him. "Just double the regular price." Frau Stern confided that they had not sold their house as required, but last Monday they had been told that the price and buyer had been approved. On Tuesday their lovely home was gone. Herr Doctor Stern had also been notified, along with all other lawyers in the city, to finish up his business because his office would be closed on December 1st. Yet, they smiled through lunch three days later. Bob was not happy, but he could think of no way to help them. So he journeyed to Marburg not knowing if they would ever meet again.

NOVEMBER 1938

On Friday November 11th, a telegram from Wurzburg shocked Bob from complacency. It was written in the illegible German script of the telegraph operator but after translation by his landlady it read: "Please come at once to William's mother." William was the Stern's son and Bob knew something terrible must have happened. The day before the Marburg synagogue had burned down, but the general feeling was that the fire had been an accident. The incident had not even made the papers. The day before fire Ernst vom Rath, a German Embassy staff member in Paris, had been shot by a Jewish refugee. For some reason, Bob failed to connect the three: the death, the fire, and the telegram. However, he boarded the first train to Wurzburg and worried for the three or four-hour trip what terrible thing might have happened, and what he could possibly do about it.

It was about ten in the evening when a stranger approached Bob on the station platform in Wurzburg and asked, in English, if he were Mr. Harlan. Identity established, she began to speak rapidly in something that sounded like English but was not. The little he understood involved, "Everything is ruined" and "Everything is gone." More than this the poor overwrought and nervous girl could not convey. He did understand that she wanted him to follow her, and they passed into the shadows. Finally, they entered a darkened building and found the door to a second-floor apartment. There he found Frau Stern, weeping, but still struggling to plan. Her relief at seeing Bob with his invaluable American passport was pathetically obvious. Her husband had been taken the previous night and their home ransacked. During the first plundering, she slipped out and came to the apartment of a relative. Fraulein Anna had stayed behind and later reported that they had come again to ransack the rooms.

Feeling helpless but knowing something must be done, Bob tried to formulate three cables to Frau Stern's three sons in America. One of her sons was about to become a citizen. This was a ray of hope, because if evidence could be obtained of Doctor and Frau Stern's certain departure from Germany, their treatment would be less harsh. They sent the cables and even made a transatlantic phone call. Son William, in Chicago, must have

suffered knowing that his parents were in dire trouble but not knowing what had happened. Nothing substantial resulted that night but a lessening of tension let Frau Stern fall into a deep sleep.

Next morning November 12th, in the comforting protection of the light of day, they went to the Stern's apartment. Fraulein Anna met them at the door, still dumb with terror. As might have been expected, the two women fell into each other's arms weeping. Bob saw few dry eyes that weekend. He surveyed the room. Never had he seen such methodic and diabolic destruction. Every door was smashed. Furniture had been shattered into bits and pieces. Each picture had been ripped from the wall and torn from the frame. Books were emptied out of bookcases with broken spines. Dishes were tossed and shattered in all directions. Mirrors had been shattered. The wonderful grandfather clock, generations old, lay crushed upon its face. Only the kitchen and Fraulein's room had been left untouched. Subsequently they found three of the 'mord' instruments (instruments of death) – thick iron rods with heavy knobs on one end that seemed admirably designed for their destructive purpose.

Bob felt utterly helpless and powerless to do anything except make notes of the destruction as they tried to restore the place to order. Each selected a room. Frau Stern's spirit began to rise until he heard her sudden cry. "Bob, please help." He found her wrestling with a table and she remarked with dry humor and damp eyes, "I am not accustomed to tables with only three legs." Soon other people began to appear. Idle curiosity hunters, empty-headed thrill seekers, but most of them were friends. Some volunteer 'Aryan' helpers, came for double pay, cleaned up, prepared things for shipping, and made simple repairs. Delivery boys from stores that were forbidden to sell things to Jews sent supplies. A little twelve-year-old girl still in her Hitler-Jugend uniform sobbed that she would never belong again. All day long Jewish women arrived with similar stories of their men gone and their homes wrecked. Their gloom and tearful reports did distract Frau Stern from her own plight. In the evening, an acquaintance came in with the glad tidings that some of the men had been released unharmed.

Frau Stern left, but Bob decided to remain overnight in the ransacked rooms. Did he want to save on his hotel bill, see what manner of men these were or what? Anyway, nothing happened, and he got nine hours of solid sleep. Frau Stern came bearing a newspaper with the news of the punishment of the Jews of Germany for the murder of Ernst von Rath, a German diplomat in Paris awakened him. The Jews were fined a billion marks and forced to obey all the rest of the new 'laws.' The paper also contained mention of the spontaneous uprising of people in their righteous wrath all over the country against the Jews. How revolting it was to read that! Those drunken marauders who had twice entered the Stern's apartment to plunder and destroy had not known the name of the owner at that address. They only knew it was one of 'the' addresses. The S.A. (brown shirts) who had been in the street outside and whose duty it was to forbid such destructive things, had merely held in order the people down in the street who were watching and laughing.

November 13th, the only visitors were two old Jewish spinsters who had been hunted from their village, and hidden in a cellar. Finally they sought out Frau Stern who had

formerly been the head of the German Red Cross in Wurzburg. While she planned for their immediate welfare, Bob hurried to find Dr. Stern's law partner who had been left unmolested. The poor fellow was utterly demoralized and knew not where to turn. "At least the Sterns have hope of getting to America. What hope have I?" he sighed. Such was the spirit of utter hopelessness that was so common to the Jews in those frightening days. Subsequently, when their spirits rose, they proceeded to make the best of what they had left. They would rise only to be beaten back by another shattering and merciless blow.

Hoping against hope that the Sterns, by reason of their son's approaching American citizenship, might join him in America, Bob made plans to return to Marburg. He advised Frau Stern to keep in touch with the American consulate and promised to write himself. Those were empty words. He had done what could be done for them. For himself he needed to avoid the registration with the police required for a stay of more than three days in any German village or town.

Less than two weeks passed, however, before Bob was on the train again to visit the American Consulate in Stuttgart. He expected the visit to be futile but educational. The Consulate at that time handled, or tried to handle, all the applications for emigration to America from Germany. The sight that met his eyes when he arrived was far from encouraging. While 'Old Glory' waved from the second story, the stairway from top to bottom was filled with patient, waiting faces eager yet despairing, hopeful yet distrustful. Bob knew that for many of them: America was at least four years distant. There were too many thousands of applications ahead of them. By virtue of an American passport, he was allowed to struggle through the crowds to the first official in a large room filled with yet more waiting people. One of the harassed, overworked vice consuls told him what he already suspected: that the Sterns could do little but wait their turn until the son received his final papers. At that time, they could apply for a visa.

Just to be thorough, he decided to wander past the British Consulate and see what was doing there. He found an empty office, as they were not accepting many applications, according to the Consul's secretary. The Consul was enjoying an English weekend, and his secretary, with time to spare, suggested that it would be possible for the Sterns to get a transit visa to England with convincing proof that they would be proceeding elsewhere in a few months and would not be a public charge. Since the Sterns had friends in England, this looked like a possibility and Bob rushed to telephone Frau Stern. Not able to reach her, he called the law partner and told him the news.

The next day, Bob took a train to Wurzburg and found Frau Stern. Her husband had been released that day with a cropped head of hair, prison pallor, and depression. He struggled to understand how his country could treat a man so cruelly, a man who had fought for his country and spent much of his life in its service. In his case the cruelty had been mental. He had the physical comforts: food, water, bed, soap, and linen. He and the other professional men imprisoned with him had not been able to have contact with anyone. He had been suddenly informed that he could go home, but he had no idea how long he could remain free. He resolved to make plans to leave his beloved native land, home of all he

cared for most, and try to establish a new home in a strange country, with a strange language, among a strange people.

Bob's news about England, while not forgotten, was dwarfed into insignificance by the return of Herr Dr. Stern. The Sterns contacted their friends in England and in a matter of days received word that a British transit visa was available for them. This promptness was due in part to the efforts of a nice English girl who, like Bob, had been befriended by the Sterns one summer. There followed the packing and shipping of as many of their worldly goods as possible. Permission to send these things could still be obtained, at a great price, subject to additional steep taxes. They could only take a nominal sum with them, so it was probably good they got something for their money. One day, in late December, Bob received a card saying they were departing for England and were still safe and sound. On the card was a stamp with the God-like features of that man of the people, Adolph Hitler.

DECEMBER 1938

In December, one last moment of German culture and friendliness surrounded Bob. His birthday was at Christmas time, and the Schaefer family had invited him to spend Christmas with them in Hennen über Schwete, a tiny village in Westphalia. Westphalia is roughly the region between the rivers Rhine and Weser, located north of the Ruhr River and centered on the cities of Bielefeld, Dortmund, Gelsenkirchen, Münster, and Osnabrück. Pastor Schaefer served three churches in three tiny villages and because he had no car the three churches had to be within easy walking distance of each other.

On Wednesday December 21, 1938, Bob climbed down from the train where a gentleman with a gray mustache and goatee, and with twinkly blue eyes approached him. Pastor Schaeffer later said that he was sure it had to be Bob because he was not wearing a hat despite the cold and snowy weather. They climbed aboard a local train for the fifteen-minute ride to Hennen. They walked through the gathering twilight along a snowy road to his home where Bob found Frau Elizabeth Schaeffer, daughter Marga amid final exams for her M.D., and Anneliese, a stay-at-home daughter with an abiding love for birds that she could identify and draw. In the twilight, Marga presented a Bach concert on their harmonium, and they snacked and sipped in the holiday atmosphere.

Wednesday was also baking day. Bob was set to grinding hard candy, nuts, spice, and other ingredients before turning his strong arms to stirring. The actual baking would not take place until tomorrow morning after a night of cooling the batter. They were making braunekuchen, hard cakes made with cardamom and syrup, from old Hamburger family recipes. At each meal there was a special grace and after supper Pastor Schaeffer read a leaf torn from his daily calendar. Although this might feel stilted and unnatural, it was not, and the family atmosphere stirred Bob's heart.

Friday while the women baked, Pastor Shaffer and Bob made parish calls Late in the afternoon, they were home at last to coffee, cakes, and newly baked Christmas biscuits. They then enjoyed a few quiet hours of reading and piano playing. On to supper, where

Bach's Christmas Oratorio broadcast from Köln serenaded them.

By Saturday the 24th, the Christmas tree was crying for decoration. The children relieved it of its distress with a plentiful supply of ornaments, tinsel, and candles. A big blue candle burned on every German Christmas tree for the Auslandsdeutsche, Germans living in foreign lands. Shortly after its decoration, the room containing the Christmas tree became off bounds. They went for coffee and cakes. Finally with the children leading, they were allowed back into the Weihnachtsstube. All stood in a half circle and sang Silent Night and listened to a simple retelling of the Christmas story. Then behind them they found a table filled with goodies and presents. Finally, as the candles began to flicker, they turned to supper.

Christmas Goose (Duck)

Ingredients: 1 big-size bird (usual bird for German Christmas - goose or duck) 150 g liver150 g sausage meat90 g breadcrumbs1 tbsp. chopped parsley, sage, and mint.2 eggs60 g walnuts 90 g raisins and sultanas120 g diced apples30 g flour

Cooking: Get the bird ready for stuffing. Blend minced liver and sausage meat with crumbs, flour and beaten eggs. Then add fruits and nuts with seasoning. Stuff the bird and put it into the oven. Bake for about 1 hour.

Traditionally, the meal consists of clear vegetable soup, poached carp with creamy horseradish and buttered potatoes, and baked stuffed apple with vanilla sauce. From this, they dashed to the radio in Pastor Schaeffer's study to listen to Rudolph Hess, Hitler's second in command, make the Christmas Eve address. Back they went to the Christmas room for another hour or so of pleasantness. Bob slept and hoped the bells would wake him in the morning for Church.

On the 25th, the celebrations continued, and the family sat down to a hearty lunch of roasted goose, red cabbage and knoedel (potato dumplings). Then everybody went for a walk before settling down to chat and eat biscuits. So ended Bob's first Christmas in Germany.

One letter to his parents, written between November and December from Marburg, said:

> "Last night, just before dropping into bed, I hastily scrawled a reminding note, 'I love my country' just as if I would forget it before morning. For that is one thing I have learned and am learning more and more is to appreciate that which I have until now taken for granted; my citizenship and many of the things for which it stands."

With a bachelor's and a law degree from the University of Chicago, Robert H. Harlan became an American Foreign Service Officer and served his country for over thirty years in the US State Department and at diplomatic and consulate posts abroad.

POSTSCRIPT

The stories of those who lived through Kristal Nacht and its aftermath never go away. In 2001, I met Marianne, a woman living in New Mexico who had been a ten-year-old living with her family in Germany in 1938. She remembered that night and the fear her family felt as her father was taken away. Early in December, her mother took her to the Christian church where the father of a friend of Marianne's was the pastor. She remembers that the government had decreed that no one could sing in a public building, so the Pastor invited the congregation to step outside where they could sing.

As the restrictions grew, it became clear that the only remedy was escape. Until the start of World War II, when borders closed, Jews were allowed to leave (though they were not allowed to take any possessions or money). Jews trapped throughout the Reich struggled to find a country that would let them in. The British Jewish Refugee Committee appealed to members of Parliament and a debate was held in the House of Commons. It was agreed to admit to England an unspecified number of children up to age seventeen. A fifty-pound Sterling bond had to be posted for each child "to assure its ultimate resettlement." The children were to travel in sealed trains. The first Kindertransport left barely one month after Kristal Nacht, the last, just two days before war broke out (September 3, 1939), which put an end to the program. Approximately 10,000 children made the trip.

Marianne, with the appropriate documents, boarded the train and arrived in England to be boarded with a family in the south. Another child from the train accompanied her. Almost a year later, her parents escaped and found her in England. They wanted her to accompany them on a ship to the United States where they had family waiting. She could not leave England because she had no documents. The train officials had taken the documents back into Germany to use again with another load of children. Her parents left. Almost another year later, the English family procured documents for Marianne and arranged for passage on a ship.

Other children were traveling to meet their parents or families. The shipping company refused to take unaccompanied children, and so they found a young woman who was traveling alone who agreed to become the guardian of these young children. Unfortunately, the young woman quickly became desperately seasick, and so the children roamed the ship at will. One of the sailors met with them every day to teach them American. He began with money and taught them to count in English and what the names of the coins were. On the last day, he gave each of the children some American coins. Marianne had a quarter.

Eventually the ship docked, and the children waited to be claimed by parents and relatives. Only Marianne remained unclaimed. At the end of the day, the officials took from her a piece of paper with the name of her aunt who lived in New York City. They called her. She talked to Marianne on the phone and explained that New York was a grid and so things were easy to find. She lived a distance away and proposed that Marianne

start walking, and they would meet at the middle intersection.

Marianne explained that she was going outside to meet her aunt, the officials let her go, and she started walking. The walk was long, and she was tired and hungry. She passed a man selling apples. The sign said $.05 each. Marianne stopped and indicated that she wanted to purchase an apple. She handed the man her quarter, and he gave her an apple. He did not give her any change, and she was afraid to ask. Over sixty years later, she remembered not the horror of Germany or the difficulty of the train, or the feeling of abandonment in England. What she remembers is that one man was so mean that he kept her quarter. It is in the small moments that we really reach others and make memories.

NOTE

Traveling through England, the Sterns did reach the United States. Bob came back to the US in 1939 and later joined the U.S. Army. One weekend in 1946, while stationed at a base near Baltimore, Bob drove to Pennsylvania where the Sterns lived with one of their sons. Frau Stern had rallied and made a new life by starting a catering business. Her Christmas cookie business thrived. Herr Stern never adjusted to the tremendous change in their life; the stress was too much for him to overcome. They had their sons, and, unlike so many others, they were safe.

Image: Berlin Wall 2006