Versions of History

On August 22, 1938, the Nazi government revoked the permits allowing Polish Jews to live in Germany. Between September 27 and 29, 12,000 Jews were deprived of their possessions, transported to the Polish border, and left there without food or shelter. Polish officials allowed them across the border, even though many no longer possessed Polish papers. The Jews were housed in makeshift accommodation in the town of Zbaszyn. They were hungry and desperate.

Among the expelled Jews was the Grynszpan family from Hannover. Esther Grynszpan sent a postcard asking for help to her 17-year-old brother Herschel, who was staying illegally with relatives in Paris. Herschel received his sister’s postcard on November 3. On November 6 he tried to convince his uncle to send money to Poland to help his family. A violent argument developed, and Herschel stormed out into the night.

The next morning Herschel bought a revolver, and went to the German Embassy. He claimed to have important documents to submit to an embassy official, and was ushered into the office of Ernst vom Rath, a 29-year-old diplomat. A few minutes later, Herschel shot vom Rath in the stomach. Herschel was taken into custody by the French police. (The photograph shows

him at the time of his arrest.) Vom Rath was taken to hospital where he died two days later on November 9.

On the night of November 9, the Nazis unleashed a pogrom. German Jews were humiliated, imprisoned, injured and murdered. Synagogues were burned. Jewish homes were ransacked. Jewish businesses were looted. The shards of glass from the broken windows provided the name by which the pogrom is remembered: *Kristallnacht.* The Nazis had been planning this pogrom for several months. The assassination of Vom Rath merely served as a pretext for its instigation.

What had actually happened in the German Embassy? In his initial statements to the French police, Herschel claimed: “I am Jewish and I wanted to avenge the great wrong which has been visited upon my fellow Jews in general and on my family in particular” (Kirsch, 2013, p 112, a paraphrase rather than a direct quotation).

The Nazis would have none of this explanation. They cast Herschel as a member of an international Jewish conspiracy against Germany. How else had he been able to enter France? Where else had an unemployed adolescent obtained the money to buy the revolver? Antifascists suggested that Herschel was an *agent provocateur*, controlled by the Gestapo, who needed a rationale for their pogrom, and who wished to eliminate vom Rath because of his homosexuality and his sympathy for the Jews. How else had someone with a loaded revolver been allowed into the embassy?

Hershel’s lawyer provided another interpretation. In this narrative, Herschel Grynzpan and Ernst vom Rath had known each other before the assassination. Herschel had been seduced and then spurned by vom Rath. The murder was thus a *crime passionelle*. Such an explanation could attenuate Herschel’s guilt. Furthermore, it could prevent any further use of the assassination to justify recriminations against the Jews. The Nazis would not make a martyr of someone who had offended

Aryan ideals by consorting with homosexuals and Jews. There is some evidence that vom Rath might have been homosexual; there is no evidence once way or the other about Herschel's sexuality. After the war, Herschel's lawyer said that the homosexual story was a fabrication

Through the early months of 1939, the trial of Herschel Grynszpan was postponed again and again. With the German invasion of Poland, war was declared between France and Germany, and a French trial became impossible. After the invasion of France, the Germans found Herschel in a Toulouse prison, indicted him on charges of high treason, and brought him to Berlin for interrogation and trial.

A show-trial was scheduled for the spring of 1942. This would demonstrate to the world the evil of the Jewish race, and justify the Nazi genocidal policies finalized at the Wannsee conference in January, 1942. Under interrogation, Grynszpan claimed that he had been seduced by vom Rath, and that the assassination had been triggered by vom Rath's refusal to do anything to help his family. Whether this version of the story was true or whether it was simply a way for Herschel to prevent the Nazis from using him to further their evil actions will never be known. The Nazis realized that the show-trial would be more embarrassment than propaganda. The trial was cancelled. Nothing more is known of Herschel Grynszpan. He was likely murdered by his captors.

Another version of Herschel's story is told in Michael Tippett's Oratorio *A Child of Our Time*, written between 1939 and 1941, and first performed in 1944. Tippett, a homosexual and pacifist, was intrigued by the story of the passionate young man who altered the course of history. However, Tippett generalized the story to present the plight of all the oppressed rather than just the Jews. Herschel became the "boy" and vom Rath the "official." The music portrays the conflict of evil and good in both history and the human mind. The music is both powerful and lyrical. Sometimes the solo lines ride

above the chorus like the individual above the general.

The oratorio is related in many ways to Handel's *Messiah*. Both works are in three parts. Handel's sections deal with the prophecies, the passion and the redemption; Tippett's sections consider the oppression, the assassination and the aftermath. The chorus that begins the second section of Tippett's oratorio – "Behold the man! The Scapegoat! The Child of our Time" – is similar both verbally and musically to Handel's "Behold the Lamb of God!" In *A Child of Our Time* Negro spirituals substitute for the chorales used in the *Messiah*. Both oratorios are focused on a passion, in its original sense of "suffering." However, Herschel is a human scapegoat and Jesus a divine sacrifice. And the modern story has no clear redemption. The final spiritual in *A Child of Our Time* – Deep River – hopes for the peace that comes after we cross the Jordan, but the oratorio was finished long before the allies crossed the Rhine.

Behind Tippett's version of Herschel's story lie the ideas of Carl Jung. Tippett had undergone Jungian analysis, and was steeped in the collective unconscious. Jung proposed that human beings only reach their potential through a process of "individuation," which unifies the conscious and unconscious parts of our personality. Within the unconscious are forces for both good and evil: the "animus" and the "shadow." Parts of Tippett's libretto contain quotations from the writings of Jung. In the first section the boy sings "I am caught between my desires and their frustration as between the hammer and the anvil." This comes from Jung's 1939 paper on *Conscious, Unconscious and Individuation*: "It is the old game of hammer and anvil; between them the patient iron is forged into an indestructible whole, an 'individual.' " Just before the end of Tippett's oratorio, the boy hopes to become his unified self: "I would know my shadow and my light, so I shall at last be whole."

What version of this piece of history is the truth? In all

probability Herschel acted simply to avenge the treatment of his family. The homosexual aspects of the story are plausible, but will never be known with any certainty. The generalization of the story in Tippett's music is beautiful, but it cannot explain the act. Though music is well suited to the general, history tends far more to the idiosyncratic. A person is an individual despite the forces of the collective.

Perhaps historical truth is only be represented by some weighted combination of all the different versions. What was can only be explained by understanding what might have been.

Jung, C. (1939/1959). Conscious, unconscious and individuation. In Jung, C. *Bollingen Series XX The archetypes and the collective unconsciousness*. (pp 275-289*).* New York: Princeton University Press (quotation is from p 288).

Kirsch, J. (2013). *The short, strange life of Herschel Grynszpan*. New York: Liveright (Norton).

Tippett, M. (1944). *A Child of Our Time: Oratorio for soli, chorus and orchestra*. London: Schott & Co. Ltd. Tippett's oratorio is discussed in the documentary by Richard Smith available on YouTube