

# November, 1938 in Königsberg

ARTHUR PROPP

*Arthur Propp (1890-1965) was a prosperous lumber merchant in Königsberg, the principal city of East Prussia. After Kristallnacht he emigrated via England to Bolivia, and following the war moved to Canada. In his later years Propp wrote a large number of manuscripts in German (currently in the possession of his son, Daniel Propp) that recount various aspects of his life — his service as a German soldier in the First World War, his experiences under the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich, and his life after emigration. Possibly the most significant of these manuscripts is the one presented here, which describes Propp's experiences during and after Kristallnacht. The text, abridged from the original version, was edited and translated by Christopher R. Friedrichs of the University of British Columbia.*

**I**t was November, 1938. You could sense that Hitler planned a new strike against the Jews. After the assassination of the Nazi diplomat vom Rath by a young Jew in Paris, this feeling of dread grew stronger.

The night that vom Rath died, I went to my friend Jim von Simkowitz. Jim was Hungarian; he had been a Hapsburg officer. He now worked in a Königsberg shipping agency. I had known him for many years. He had a small apartment, not far from mine, and I spent the night there.

The next day, around ten, I went back out into the street. The sun was shining. The sky was blue. All the fears I had felt the night before drifted away like spiderwebs in the wind. But suddenly Dora Wolff spotted me. "For God's sake, what are you doing here? Hide, fast. Don't you know what's going on?" Then Frau Jacobsohn came and grabbed my hand, saying "Quick, quick, before anyone sees you . . ." and took me to her home. Both women told me, through their tears, that the synagogue had been burned down, along with the Jewish orphanage and the cemetery; all the Jewish males had been picked up during the night by the SS and the SA and were probably in jail and nobody knew what was happening to them.

I felt suddenly as if the earth was quaking. Something was happening, something the human mind could not absorb: the orphanage . . . the cemetery. . . .

But here I was in the home of Frau Jacobsohn, where I had never been before. "Where is your husband?" I asked. She held her hands before her eyes.

The telephone? Was it still working? Yes. I called home. A voice stammered out, "Good God, it's Herr Propp." It was Glinka, my housekeeper. First I heard nothing but sobs. Then she started to talk. They had come at five in the morning. A friend was at my place; he had come to see me in the evening, after I left, and decided to stay. They took him along. They had interrogated her about my whereabouts, but she did not know.

I called my neighbor, a trusted friend. He came with his car and brought me to his place. But a few hours later he got nervous. "They have their eye on me, you know." I knew that — he was a well-known anti-Nazi. "My wife and children would not say anything," he said. "If it were just for them, I could hide you. But the maid has seen you. She knows who you are, she knows what is going on."

I decided to try anything to get across the border. I thought of friends who had already escaped to Lithuania, who would be waiting for me there.

I called my secretary Fräulein Mey, who had worked for me for 20 years. I asked her to bring me 3,000 marks from my office. I called Jim and told him where I was. Fräulein Mey never came with the money.

But Jim came, right away. From him I began to learn the full extent of the catastrophe: Jews all over Germany had been arrested; many of them had been carried off to concentration camps. All over Germany synagogues lay in ashes. Jewish stores had been plundered, Jewish homes ransacked, cemeteries desecrated. It was all over for the Jews. But how to get out? How could one save oneself? How could one get over a border?

"It will be hard," Jim said. "The main roads will be under surveillance for escaping Jews. The only chance is at night, when they are tired and think they have caught all of them."

Then I had an idea: there was a man named Schneiderei, a big, good-natured, trustworthy man who used to drive the (mostly Jewish) cattle merchants across the countryside in his big old Ford. I had also driven with him a lot. Jews were his livelihood.

"I want to get to Tilsit," I told him by phone. "Tonight. Do you have time?"

"I don't know, does it have to be tonight? Can't it be tomorrow morning?"

"No," I said, "tonight."

"Very well," he replied. "Come around eleven. I'll be ready. I have to get gas." He knew that I owned a saw-mill in Tilsit. He had often driven me there.

It was shortly before eleven when I left with Jim in his little car. I had nothing but my coat. Schneidereit lived outside the city, in a remote settlement. His car was not there. His wife told me to wait; her husband had just gone to get gas. Schneidereit did not return. A motorcyclist in uniform drove up, stopped, drove on — a police station was nearby. In the neighboring house lights were still on. It seemed that someone was keeping an eye on Schneidereit's house.

"Let's drive back to town," Jim said. "Something's wrong. It's taking too long."

We were almost in the city, about to cross a bridge. Suddenly we heard beeping. A big black car raced past us, stopped, and blocked our way. Four SS men jumped out, revolvers in hand. "Stop, you Jewish scum," they shouted. "So you thought you could get to Tilsit and disappear across the border? We knew about that. Schneidereit reported everything."

It was midnight when we were delivered to the police presidium, the headquarters of the Gestapo. The four SS men were half drunk. In the Gestapo office there were only two or three men. They asked few questions.

"Bring the Jew Propp into the main cell. See that you run him down the stairs fast; maybe he'll break his neck."

A small winding staircase led five floors down to the cellar. But before I was too far down I could still hear the sound of a man being punched, and I heard someone shouting: "But you aren't even Jewish — you are Catholic — and here you were helping a Jew get over the border — and you imagine you can say that you don't think there is anything wrong with 'helping a friend'? You, who get 400 marks salary in the shipping agency, you can be sure that that will stop."

The winding steps ended in a little guard's office. An old police guard awaited me. "Hey, don't be so excited . . . you can bring all your stuff with you, just come with me, Herr Propp, the main thing is to calm down."

I followed him over a little stone stairway to the cellar, down a long corridor, at the end of which was a heavy iron door with huge iron bars and a lock of the kind I had seen in old castles. He unbarred the door. I heard the door close behind me and heard the bars being put back into place and the door being locked.

It was a vault, almost dark. Somewhere high up there must have been a small oil lamp. Slowly my eyes began to adjust to the darkness. There were bare walls, and plain black benches — with people on them. People covered entirely with coats, and with hats over their faces,

only the feet sticking out. In the middle of the chamber was a pail. An old man was sitting on it.

A sudden wave of joy and relief swept over me. There were other people here, other Jews. I went from bench to bench, lifting the hats that covered each face. Some woke up. "Propp," they said, and went back to sleep. I knew most of them. There were 13, including the man on the pail. In one corner a man was sitting up against the wall, not sleeping. He made some room for me on his bench. I stretched out and fell asleep. One can sleep on a wooden plank, or anything, after a day like that.

**W**hen I woke up it was already light. My neighbor was still sitting up against the wall. He was staring at the wall as if it was not there.

"Who are you?" I said. "I know almost everyone here, but not you."

"I am a teacher."

"And what do you teach?"

"Ancient languages . . . I teach at the University."

"You have a family?"

"Yes. My wife; she is Christian. And two daughters. They both belong to the Hitler Youth. I had a son too, but he died a year ago. He was 20. You know, this is the first time in my life that I am together with Jews. My parents lived in Munich. They were rich, from my mother's side. My father did not really work. All the important people who came to Munich came to our house. When I was growing up I never heard anything about Jews, I have never set foot inside a synagogue — but I did pay my dues to the Jewish community. I don't know why. I guess I thought one doesn't lose one's connection with one's own people, even if one has nothing to do with them. But of course they found my name on some list of the Jewish community. So here I am."

"But why can't you sleep?" I asked. "Why do you keep staring at the wall?"

"I have been thinking," he said, "all night, and now I know why the Jews of the middle ages, at the time of the Crusades, preferred to take their lives rather than have dealings with Christians. It was not because they were Jews, it had nothing to do with religion — it was sheer disgust. They preferred to kill themselves than to submit to the brute force of people they considered barbarians. That was the reason. From this cell the road goes right to the funeral pyres of the middle ages. Nothing has changed."

"And you?" I said, "What would you do, today, if . . .?"

"Me?" he replied. "There is no question. I would kill myself without a thought rather than abase myself before the Nazis."

Suddenly, the cell was full of light. Or so it seemed to me.

My first morning in prison was a time of total confusion. Obviously not one of us had ever been in prison

before, we had no idea what to do. But the old guard, Wachtmeister Soult, helped us. First we had to pile up our coats. Then it was time to get washed. The great door opened and we were allowed to walk up and down the corridor and wash ourselves. Then we got breakfast: a tin can with hot, dark, chicory-flavored water — it was far from coffee, but at least it was hot — and some bread, even some thin marmalade. We were hungry, and it tasted good. There were no leftovers. But now what? What would happen to us? What was happening at home, to our wives and children? What would they do with us? Work camp, concentration camp — or even worse? Would we ever see our families again? Or our possessions? The thoughts plagued us like insects.

Obviously we had to keep busy if we were not to give way to despair. By now we were 12 — two had been taken away, nobody knew where. I was chosen as leader, and we decided to spend our time teaching each other things. We called it our “adult education program.” Maas, the teacher, gave English. Jim gave instruction in various forms of boxing, and in jujitsu. Falkenstein was especially versatile. He was a glazier, so he lectured about the history of glass, and about how it was made. But Falkenstein, who was about sixty, was also in charge of entertainment. He draped some cloth around himself and demonstrated how the dancing girls had performed, 40 years earlier, in the first cabarets. He copied their suggestive movements so flawlessly we forgot ourselves in laughter.

An auto mechanic taught us how motors and automobiles were assembled. A stamp dealer spoke about rare stamps. I myself had to lecture about lumber. I was also in charge of exercises we did every morning and evening.

There was a pair of young brothers in the cell, good boys, about 20 years old. They were musical. Every evening when we lay down on the benches, they sang and whistled duets and soothed us to sleep.

The others, who had no special contribution to make, were in charge of keeping the cell clean. Our rules were strict: the floors and benches had to be scrubbed, the blankets, once we got some, had to be cleaned off, the latrine pails had to be kept as clean as cutlery.

In a week we were quite used to each other. Word had also gotten around where we were. Food packages arrived. Everything was shared. Everyone tried to make sure nobody would lose spirit. Nobody let himself show what he was feeling. Yet despite the appearance of calm, as we lay on the benches all of us were confronted with the most fearful thoughts. Nobody spoke then. Fear lay like a cloud upon us. I contemplated what the best I could hope for might be. I tended to assume that the concentration camps were too far from East Prussia, and already too full, for me to be sent there. I recalled how, during the war, Russian soldiers had been used as

forced laborers in agriculture. Perhaps I would be sent as a laborer to the Samland nearby, where some people knew me. It was the best I dared to hope for. If that were my fate, at least I would not starve or freeze to death, and maybe I'd even have a proper bed.

There were two men who seemed to be disturbed by nothing. One was Maas, the teacher. He made himself quite at home in prison; he was one of those high intellects who are little affected by their external surroundings. He ate with a hearty appetite whatever was put before him or whatever one of the others had left in his cup or on his plate, as if he had never eaten anything but prison food all his life.

The only other person whose mood never soured was the old guard, Wachtmeister Soult. Gradually he let us spend more time in the corridor than in the cell. The corridor was bright and had windows; through the bars we could look into the outside world. This small corridor, onto which many cells opened, seemed to us a wonderful place compared to the cell.

“You know,” the guard said to me once, “I've been a Nazi since 1925. My sons, too. So in 1933 I was put in charge of setting up the camp at Quedenau. I did my duty, I did what had to be done. But we didn't beat the people. I've always had a heart. If we could spare some underwear or collect some, I'd give it to the prisoners. I'll tell you — just between you and me — there is one thing about all this I don't understand. I'm a good National Socialist, you know, and a good German, too — but this stuff about the Jews, I just can't see it. I was a guard for years in the suburb where lots of Jews live. They never did anyone any harm. A lot of them were soldiers in the war, none of them ever swindled anyone. They were good citizens.”

“Herr Wachtmeister,” I said abruptly, “can't we get some cigars, or cigarettes?”

“No,” he said, “provisionally forbidden for your group.” But he pulled out a big black cigar, lit it, and smoked it. Someone called and he went into his office, leaving the cigar behind in an ashtray. The 12 of us finished it off.

One morning Jim was summoned. He came back after 10 hours. He looked so pale and broken that nobody dared to ask any questions. He flung himself into a corner of the cell. There was a deadly silence.

At night he talked to me. “They know everything. It is amazing how much they know. Three men interrogated me. Everything, from the time I was born. They know that I fought for Béla Kun back in Budapest, during the Communist revolution. They know what I did in Russia. If they get into my house now, they will find pictures of Stalin. They think I'm a spy, they think that's why I got a job in the shipping agency.”

The next day Wachtmeister Soult told me: “It's definite now. You are getting out of here soon. But not your friend Jim. He's never coming out of this place.”

We sat gloomily in the cell as the door creaked open.

Four S.A. men were there. Young men, faces of stone.  
"Jew Propp — come here."

I followed them. They took me outside to a car. I got in. Nobody talked. The car headed in the direction of the Brown House. That was where Jews and non-Jews were tortured to death. We turned in another direction. A sudden thought: this is even worse — the cemetery: short "trial," right next to the open grave.

But no. Another turn, to an office building. Into the building. Offices with people in and out of uniform. But offices — thank God for offices! Better than the other places.

Suddenly I saw Fräulein Mey, my old trusted Fräulein Mey. There were other people there, polite people. They were the local leaders of the Nazis. The new County Leader was there. He came from Tilsit, and knew me. Also there, in uniform, was notary Wolff, a friend of my brother's. I breathed more easily.

"Herr Propp," he said, "here is Fräulein Mey. She informs us that you have promised to transfer ownership of the property at Hinterrossgarten 40 to her, in recognition of her many years of devoted service. Is that true?"

Fräulein Mey was sitting next to me. She nudged me with her foot. Suddenly I thought: she wants to rescue the property for me, by letting it be transferred to her. Otherwise it might just be seized outright.

"It is true," I said.

The County Leader said firmly, "You are under no pressure here. Nobody is forcing you to transfer the property. I repeat: nobody."

"It is true," I repeated.

"Very well. In that case, we have notary Wolff right here, to draw up the document transferring possession to Fräulein Mey."

Only later did I find out that the whole episode was a trick, arranged in advance. Perhaps at first she had really wanted to help. But eventually greed took over. Still, what is a piece of property, once one has been driven past the Brown House — and the cemetery? I was relieved to be returned to my cell. All the others breathed more easily too when they saw me.

The next day Jim was summoned again by the Gestapo. He came back after only a few hours. This time he did not seem so beaten down.

"So . . .?" I asked.

He stretched out on the bench and murmured, "Free ticket out of here — who cares about anything else? Anyway, I had no choice."

I did not understand what he was talking about. I did not want to ask.

Soult fetched me and brought me up to the police office. In the room stood a gorgeous woman, who looked at me in a friendly way. I froze: I had never seen her in my life. But obviously she was going to report me. And an accusation of *Rassenschande* — sexual relations between Jews and non-Jews — would be the end for me.

But instead she said, quite casually, "I am Frau Dzubba. You must know that my husband is the right-hand man of Gauleiter Koch. I heard that you are thinking of selling your villa on Kronprinzenstrasse. I am sure you will have no objection if I purchase it."

Well, I thought, losing a house is better than *Rassenschande*.

"Certainly," I replied, "it would be a pleasure."

Soon after this came the end of my stay in prison. But first there was one more visit to the police office. There were a police captain in uniform and three men in suits. One was the District Economic Advisor of the party.

"We understand, Herr Propp, that you have been wanting to dispose of your real property?"

"Oh yes. For a long time."

For a long time, actually, Herr Schultze-Roever had been interested in my property. This was a nice turn of events for him, to get it for free.

"Do you attach any importance, Captain, to keeping Herr Propp any longer in prison?"

"Depends entirely on you," the captain said.

"As far as we are concerned . . ."

"You are free, Herr Propp," said the captain.

In exchange for my property, I was no longer "Jew Propp," but "Herr."

I returned with mixed feelings to the cell. All of my cellmates looked at me, but asked nothing. Nothing was asked in the cell: one waited until someone wanted to say something.

"I can go," I said slowly and told what had happened.

All were quiet. Each thought, "Why you and not me?"

But they helped me collect my things, the handful of things that my housekeeper Glinka had brought for me. Then each one came, singly: "Can you visit my mother?" "Can you visit my wife?" "Can you . . .?" "Can you . . .?" I had a notebook, and took down all the addresses. I promised each one I would do what he asked. Especially Jim — Jim who was in the cell with us Jews, because he had tried to help me get over the border, Jim who would probably lose his position on my account. God only knew what would happen to him.

As I came out into the day, around noon, my eyes were blinded by the light. It was Saturday. People were leaving their work to go home. Across from the prison people were coming and going, the streets were swarming with people.

I stood and stared. Right now, hundreds of thousands of Jewish people were sitting in concentration camps, being robbed of their lifetime's earnings, being beaten, being killed — and here people were coming and going and laughing and living, as if the Jews had nothing to do with them. But it was not really a matter of Jews, it had to do with simple justice, with human decency. A sudden wave of hatred swept over me.

I did not take the tram home. I did not want to mingle

with these people. Instead I walked quickly to the Lithuanian consulate. That was where Jim's girlfriend, Fräulein Markow, worked.

"Message from Jim," I said. "He wants you to go to his apartment and take everything out that would not look good. You have the key." "I did it all already," she said. "Half an hour after his arrest. The Gestapo came too late."

I went home. I took a bath to wash off the prison filth. The house seemed strange to me. Then I went to Consul Haslinger, head of the shipping firm in which Jim worked. I told him what Jim had said. "I'm glad you came," he said. "But as for Jim . . . I'm not sure I can do anything for him. He certainly can't work for me any longer. Anyway, he was getting a bit strange. Maybe it was some problem with one of his girlfriends. His work was getting very sloppy. But do visit me again. Maybe later on I can judge better what we can do about Jim."

My next stop was at an old house in Sackheim. There was a dark apartment in which three women sat, desperate about a 16-year-old boy from Riga, their nephew, who had been one of my cellmates. From them I heard a strange story. When all the Jewish males were being arrested, in their anxiety the three women told the boy to report to the nearest police station. He went, and the police told him go home and wait till he was picked up. But nobody came. The women got more and more nervous. So they sent him to an S.A. post. The S.A. finally took him. Only later did they hear that some Jewish males had been left free. Now they were bitterly reproaching themselves. I could only urge them to be brave. The fact that the boy was still alive was some consolation to them.

Soon it was Monday, my first workday after the prison. There was dead silence in my office as I entered. Only Frau Zimmermann cried. She was the bookkeeper and in charge of the money. Fräulein Mey, who had received the house, said nothing.

Strange, I thought, that Fräulein Mey says nothing but Frau Zimmermann cries. She must be more devoted to me than I realized. I stood by her and tried to calm her down, but she kept saying the same thing: "I have not slept a single night, not a single night, I can't get over it."

"Well," I thought, "at least some people. . . ."

Intermittently, in her sobs, I could make out the word "sister."

"What sister?" I thought. I did not know she had a sister.

"Your sister," she said. "Remember that business with your sister? When she came from Paris to Berlin for the operation? You had me make out a check for 500 marks. But your sister lives in Paris. So that counted as an exchange transfer, didn't it? And you know one needs permission for that. It was two years ago, and I haven't had a good night's sleep since then. After all, I signed the check, I will be held responsible too. I have to

report it before they find out. Unless I get 5,000 marks, I just have to report it."

I called Bottke, the accountant. He negotiated with Frau Zimmermann. In the end she got 3,000 marks.

Freudenreich turned up. He had been with me for 18 years, most recently in charge of the sawmill in Juditten. There had been a problem — the cash balance at the sawmill had been 1,800 marks. But the cashbox was empty. Freudenreich had not taken any money for himself, he explained. He had needed it for his family. The children had been sick.

"Freudenreich," I had said, "You can pay it off in installments."

I had gone to Damm, the lumber dealer, and arranged for Freudenreich to get a new job. His new job paid better, and he would have nothing to do with money. I thought things had gotten better for him and his wife. But now he turned up and said, "Of course I am very grateful to you, but, you know, I worked for you so many years, perhaps you could give me a little help before you leave Germany. I do have a big family."

"You are a young man, you have your family," I told him, "you have a good job, a good future. Now I have to leave Germany almost empty-handed. Has the thought ever occurred to you that perhaps I should be allowed to hang on to something for myself, instead of losing the last of what I might be able to take with me?"

He smiled weakly and disappeared.

I sold a house I owned in Berlin. The purchaser had years earlier been assistant to the socialist leader Hugo Haase. "You can count on me," the purchaser said. "I'm still a Social Democrat, through and through." The payment never came. Finally, even my good old housekeeper Glinka came to see me. "Now everybody else has gotten something," she said. "I alone have been good and true to you. Should I be left quite empty-handed?" She was pleased to get 1,000 marks, and did not even pack the fur coat and the Brussels lace I had offered her.

By now the others had all been released from prison — including Jim. I went back to Consul Haslinger, about Jim. "Don't worry about him," he said. "He won't need you anymore, or me." He refused to say more. I had no idea what he meant. Then Jim came to see me; he had been to Berlin.

"I am getting married tomorrow," he said, "to Fräulein Markow. At the Hotel Berliner Hof. Just a small group of friends." He said nothing about inviting me. I remained silent. "I have gotten a job," he said. "Head of a shipping agency in Budapest. It's being completely reorganized for me." Then he went to a telephone. "Gestapo?" he said. "I would like to speak to Oberregierungsrat Fixon." Fixon was the head of the Gestapo in Königsberg. "Simkowitz here. I'll be there around twelve. Will you be in?"

Now, at last, I understood. There was a long silence between us. Then he began to talk.

"I had no choice," he said. "It was a free ticket out, or else. Even that was just due to an accident. You see, one of Himmler's top men was at one time here in Königsberg. He had a girlfriend here, and he had a child with her. Fräulein Markow and I knew the woman. He knew me, too. So, because of that they put me in touch with him. What happened then, well, you can see for yourself."

**O**n the day before my departure from Germany, I visited Wachtmeister Sout. He lived in a small, rather dilapidated house near Metgethen. It was not easy to locate him. "So," he said, as I handed him a parcel with clothes for his current prisoners, "you have not forgotten. Try not to think too ill of Germany," he said. "I hope everything goes well for you. Good luck. But do me one favor — don't write to me."

Every year on the tenth of November, in my thoughts I find myself again in the prison cell. And I ask myself, what happened to my 12 cellmates? In some cases, I know: Maas made it to England. Lowenstein's family went to Brazil. And one day in November, 1953 I received a letter from the daughter of Falkenstein, the glazier. Her father, who had lived with her in Zurich, had just died. Often, she wrote, he had spoken of our association in prison.

How often I think of Falkenstein! Here were 12 Jews together for the first time in prison. They had been torn from their beds by the Nazis, their homes destroyed, their synagogues burned, their cemeteries desecrated — and yet, a man in his sixties danced. In a dark cell, with death before each eye, 12 Jews laughed, forgetting everything around them and ahead of them. What a will to live! Perhaps that is why, despite everything that has happened, there are still Jews in the world. ■