

Heroes of the Holocaust

By Sr. Elizabeth Ann, S.J.W.

These articles are meant to recognize and honor a few of the brave and saintly men and women who were willing to suffer greatly for their Catholic Faith during World War II. There is no doubt that the Jewish people were the main target of Nazi hatred and racism. By the end of the war, approximately six million of our Jewish brothers and sisters had been deliberately murdered, over one million of them children. While remembering this, we must not forget that the Holocaust also claimed at least five million Gentile victims. Any system, such as National Socialism, that preaches a philosophy of hatred and racial superiority will have its avid supporters and its enemies. The Nazis arrested any person or group considered either racially inferior or a threat to the tenets of National Socialism.

The men and women in these articles—priests, religious and laity—were faithful in their daily lives to the demands of the Gospel. Because they were faithful, they were considered a threat by the Nazi regime.

There is an intimate connection between the way we live our life and the way we die. Every person mentioned in this book led a holy life even before confronted with imprisonment and death; they radiated Christ when things were going well and when things were going poorly. They did what they believed God wanted them to do, regardless of the consequences. Many did not survive the war. Others survived, only to die shortly after liberation because of the poor treatment they had endured.

Each of these biographies is unique because each person reflects Christ in a unique way. What the stories have in common is the witness each person was willing to give. The sacrifices they made were the culmination of lives lived for others in imitation of Christ. They died the way they lived; with love for their enemies and hope in the Resurrection. May their witness inspire us to follow the path of truth regardless of the consequences.

I. Heroes of Poland

II. Heroes of Austria

III. Heroes of France

IV. Heroes of Germany

V. Heroes of Holland

VI. Hero of Italy

Heroes of the Holocaust: Austria



Blessed Mary Restituta Kafka

Blessed Maria was born in the present Czech Republic on May 10, 1894. The sixth daughter of a shoemaker, she was baptized Helen. Helen grew up in Vienna where she worked as a salesclerk and then as a nurse. While working as a nurse, she met the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity and entered their community in 1914. She took the name Restituta, a martyr of the early Church. Beginning in 1919, she worked as a surgical nurse. Over the

next twenty years, Sister Restituta gained a reputation as a defender and protector of the poor and oppressed. When the Nazis took over Austria, Sister Restituta was very vocal in her opposition to the new regime, even referring to Hitler as a “madman”. However, when a Nazi doctor was falsely accused of a crime, she protected him. When a new hospital wing was constructed, Sister Restituta hung a crucifix in every room. The Nazis demanded the crosses be taken down and the sister refused. They arrested Sister Restituta in October, 1942. She spent her time in prison caring for other prisoners. When she was offered her freedom in return for leaving her religious community, the brave sister declined. Sister Restituta was sentenced to death for “aiding and abetting the enemy in the betrayal of the fatherland and for plotting high treason”.⁽¹⁾ When a request for clemency reached the desk of Martin Bormann, a high ranking Nazi official, he replied that her execution would provide “effective intimidation”⁽²⁾ for others who might want to resist the Nazis. She was decapitated on March 30, 1943. Her last recorded words are, “I have lived for Christ; I want to die for Christ”.⁽³⁾ Before being led to her death, she asked the prison chaplain to mark her forehead with the Sign of the Cross. She was beatified in 1998.



Franz Jaegerstaetter

Franz was born on May 20, 1907, the illegitimate son of Franz Bachmeier and Rosalie Huber. The elder Franz supported his son and Rosalie until his death in World War I. Franz was raised by his maternal grandmother, a devout Catholic, until Rosalie married in 1917. Rosalie's new husband gave young Franz his name and the boy went to live with them on a farm.



Franz astride the first motorcycle in St. Radegund

Franz was born and raised in the tiny village of St. Radegund in Upper Austria. After finishing elementary school, Franz began helping his stepfather on the farm. While his days were spent on the farm, his nights were often spent drinking and fighting with groups from other villages.

In 1934, Franz even spent a few days in jail for fighting with some border patrolmen. In spite of his wild behavior, Franz still attended Mass regularly and he also read a great deal. In 1934, Franz left his home to work in the Steiermark iron mines. During the three years he spent in the mines, working in an anti-Catholic environment, Franz had a religious conversion. Now when he attended Mass it was not out of habit, but out of devotion. As his prayer life deepened, Franz talked to a priest about entering religious life. The priest reminded him that his parents had no one to care for them and so Franz gave up the idea of religious life. In 1936, Franz returned to St. Radegund and surprised everyone by his new way of life. In April of that year, he married a devout young woman name Francesca. Franz continued going to daily Mass. He fasted until noon, worked on his farm and was also the church sacristan. As the Nazi presence became more obvious in Austria, Franz became an outspoken opponent. In the voting that occurred in 1938, Germany gained control of Austria. Franz was warned that he would get into trouble for voting against the Nazis. However, his conscience would not allow him to do otherwise. In 1939, Franz was drafted into the Austrian army.



The mother and wife of Franz Jägerstätter with his three daughters, Maria, Aloisia and Rosalia. Franz Jägerstätter was called up for military service at the beginning of October 1940 and his wife sent him this photo on 3.11.40: "As a reminder of your loved ones at home" as she wrote on the back.

After seven months of training he was sent home because he was a farmer. Knowing he might be recalled to military service, Franz also knew he could not serve in the military. To him it would be actively participating in evil. He sought the advice of relatives and clergy. They all advised him to accept military service. Their reasoning was logical; if Franz refused to serve, it would not matter to the war effort; however, his refusal could result in a death sentence. Besides his responsibility to his wife, the couple also had three young daughters to be concerned about. In spite of their arguments, Franz was growing strong in his conviction that he could not support the Nazi war effort and still be a Catholic. His fellow villagers were beginning to view Franz as a religious fanatic. When

the orders for military service finally came in February of 1943, Franz reported to the barracks and refused to take the loyalty oath to Hitler. He was immediately sent to a military prison.



Franz Jägerstätter received this picture in the Berlin prison: it brought him joy and "damp eyes". The message reads "Dear Father, come soon!"

Franz's letters to his wife reveal his concern for his family, especially his daughters. He spent his time in prison praying, writing a spiritual diary and comforting other prisoners. In May, he was transferred to a prison in Berlin where he was put on trial by the Reich Military Tribunal. During the trial, Franz was found guilty of harming the war effort and sentenced to death. Francesca and the parish priest of St. Radekund arrived in Berlin in July. They had only twenty minutes to say goodbye to one another. On the night of August 8, 1943, Franz was allowed to write a final letter. A lesser man might have given in and agreed to compromise his conscience. Another might have become bitter at the Nazis. How-

ever, Franz was neither of these; he hated what National Socialism stood for but he did not hate the Nazis. In one of his diaries he writes: "Love of enemy is not unprincipled weakness, but heroic strength of soul and imitation of the divine example."⁽⁴⁾ The next day, August 9, at Brandenburg Prison, Franz was beheaded and his body cremated. Three years later, his ashes were taken to St. Radegund. Franz refused to participate in evil even when pressured to compromise his conscience. His devotion to the truth is a powerful witness to those living in our own time who find it difficult to stand firm against evil. In 1984, the President of Austria issued a special "Award of Honor" to Franz. More and more Austrians are coming to view this "religious fanatic" as a national hero. Even the German government has stated that Franz Jaegerstaetter's trial was "unjust and that he had been convicted solely for the preservation of the Nazi dictatorship."⁽⁵⁾ The diocese of Linz, Austria, is beginning the process for his canonization. Francesca is still alive and works as the church sacristan at St. Radegund.

Blessed Otto Neururer

Born March 25, 1882, in Piller, Austria, Otto was the twelfth child born to a farm family. Otto lost his father when he was still young and so his mother had the sole responsibility of raising the children and running the family farm and mill. Otto attended a minor, then a major seminary where he excelled in his studies and was known for his virtuous life. After his ordination, the new priest was assigned to a parish at Gotzens, near Innsbruck. By the time Father Otto arrived at his new parish, the Nazis were already in control of Austria. Although timid by nature, Father Otto was firm when defending the truth. The young priest advised a parishioner not to marry a divorced man with an evil reputation. When the divorced man found out about the priest's advice, he complained to a Nazi official who had Father Otto arrested for "slander to the detriment of German marriage".⁽⁶⁾ Father Otto was sent to Dachau and then Buchenwald concentration camp. In spite of torture and starvation, this simple priest sought to help and comfort his fellow prisoners as best he could. His mission of mercy eventually led to his execution. A prisoner asked to be baptized and though any religious activity was strictly forbidden, the priest consented. Two days later, Father Otto found out it was a Nazi trap-the man asking for baptism had been an informer. Father Otto was sent to a "bunker of extreme punishment"⁽⁷⁾ and hung upside down for

thirty-six hours until he died on May 30, 1940. Father's religious superiors were told the priest had died of a cerebral hemorrhage. His ashes were sent to his parish at Gotzens. As far as we know, Father Otto was the first Catholic priest to be martyred under the Nazi regime and it was as a martyr that he was beatified in 1996.



Blessed Jacob Gapp

Born in Wattens, Austria, in 1897, Jacob was the seventh child of a working class family. He served in the Austrian Army during World War I and spent more than a year as a prisoner of war. In 1920, he entered the Society of Mary. Father Gapp began his priestly ministry in the 1930's, a time when Austria had large numbers of unemployed. His fellow Marianists knew that Father Gapp had a "strong sense of justice and a love for the poor".⁽⁸⁾ Following his own motto, "Action is more important than theory," Father Gapp enlisted the students he taught to help care for the poor by collecting and distributing food and money. In winter, each priest received a certain amount of coal to heat their rooms. Father Gapp gave his share to poor families. It was also during this period that the priest began to realize that National Socialism was "abhorrent and totally irreconcilable with the Catholic faith".⁽⁹⁾ Father Gapp's criticism of the Nazi regime became even more outspoken when the Nazis annexed Austria. Afraid for his life, Father Gapp's superiors as-

signed him to different areas in Austria and finally, in 1939, he was sent to France. In France, he continued his opposition to Nazism. Later, his superiors sent him to Spain. In August, 1942, Father Gapp received word that some Jews living in France were interested in learning more about Christianity. After receiving several such messages, the priest drove into France and was immediately arrested by the Gestapo who had tricked the priest. He was taken to a prison in Berlin where he was questioned about his views on National Socialism. Clearly and fearlessly, Father Gapp denounced Nazism and upheld the authority of the Catholic Church. One of his interrogators testified that the Marianist priest "was a man full of the Spirit of God. His faith left him no choice except openly and boldly to profess it."⁽¹⁰⁾ Father Gapp was accused of high treason and was beheaded on August 13, 1943. His body was never returned to his family because, "Under questioning Gapp himself repeated that he had acted in the name of the Catholic faith...and pointed to religion as the sole cause of his actions. It could be that people prey to Catholicism might see him as a martyr for the faith and that instead of being buried as befits a traitor to the fatherland, he be hailed...as a victim for his faith."⁽¹¹⁾ The Germans almost got their wish. Father Gapp's martyrdom was forgotten in the confusion that followed the war. It wasn't until 1983, that a fellow Marianist found the dossier on Father Gapp in the archives of the Gestapo. In 1996 he was beatified and declared a martyr for the faith.

Fr. Johann Gruber

The Saint of Gusen

Father Gruber was a prominent teacher as well as a priest when the Nazis came to power in Austria. An outspoken critic of the new regime, he was arrested by the Germans in 1938 and accused of sexually abusing some of his students. After spending two years in prison, he was sent to Dachau and then on to the concentration camp at Gusen. In 1940, when most of the priest-prisoners were all shipped to Dachau, Father Gruber volunteered to remain in Gusen. Since Father Gruber was considered an “important” prisoner, he received special privileges denied his fellow inmates. The priest took full advantage of his special status to help those most in need. He organized a school inside the camp for Polish children. He was also able to establish contacts with people outside the camp. His friends on the outside were able to smuggle money into the camp and Father Gruber (called Papa Gruber by many of the prisoners) was thus able to bribe the guards and provide food and medicine to the prisoners. He also smuggled information about the conditions at the camp to the outside world. A fellow prisoner describes the priest as “no longer young, yet he would think nothing of undertaking long walks on his errands of mercy...a small man with a great soul, he knew no fear and was constantly on the look-out for new ways of help-

ing his fellows.”⁽¹²⁾ Unfortunately, the Gestapo discovered the smuggling operation in spring 1944. The camp commander had Father Gruber thrown naked into the concrete bunker for three days. The priest was repeatedly beaten and doused with cold water. In April of 1944, he was hanged. In 1987, the cause for canonization of Father Gruber was introduced at the Vatican. In 1999, the Nazi sentence against the priest was officially reversed.

Footnotes:

1. Quoted in L'Osservatore Romano, June 24, 1998
2. Matthew Bunson, Margaret Bunson and Stephen Bunson, John Paul II's Book of Saints, (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1999), p. 247.
3. Bunson, p. 247.
4. Diary of Franz Jaegerstaetter, quoted in National Catholic Register, March 12-18, 2000.
5. National Catholic Register, March 12-18, 2000.
6. Bunson, p. 320.
7. Bunson, p. 320.
8. Rev. James L Heft, S.M., "Jakob Gapp: Marianist and Martyr," January 14, 1999
9. Heft
10. Giovanni Ricciarda, Men Without a Country, 30 Days 12, (1996), p. 54.
11. Ricciardi, p. 56.
12. Father John M. Lenz, Christ in Dachau, (Vienna, Austria, 1960), p. 73-74