

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

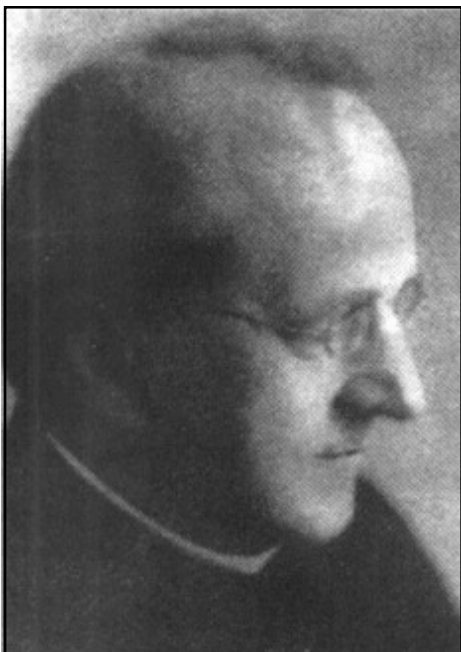
III. Heroes of France

IV. Heroes of Germany

V. Heroes of Holland

VI. Hero of Italy

Heroes of the Holocaust: Germany



Blessed Bernard Lichtenberg

Bernard Lichtenberg was born on December 3, 1875, in Silesia (central Europe), the oldest of five children. He grew up in a loving, Christian environment. After leaving high school he entered the seminary to study for the priesthood. Bernard was ordained in 1899, at the age of twenty-four. From the time of his ordination until his arrest by the Nazis, Father Lichtenberg served at several parishes, first as an assistant and later as a pastor. As a pastor, he showed himself to be a true shepherd, having unlimited charity, especially for the poor and abandoned. As the Nazis began their rise to power in the 1930's, Father Lichtenberg was assigned to St. Hedwig's Cathedral in Berlin. By 1935, the priest began hear-

ing about the appalling conditions in the concentration camps. He protested the arrest and killing of the sick and mentally ill as well as the persecution of his Jewish brothers and sisters. The brave priest even protested in person to Nazi officials, who dismissed the priest as a nuisance. His sermons condemned the Nazis, their dogmas and their treatment of people. He would end Mass by praying for the persecuted Jews. Father Lichtenberg also did what he could to alleviate the physical suffering of those being persecuted. What had been a slight nuisance to the Nazis, grew as Father Lichtenberg continued his crusade to defend the rights of the Church as well as the rights of those being persecuted. Many people warned the priest that he was in danger of being arrested for his activities, but Father Lichtenberg never wavered. In 1941, Father Bernard was arrested for subversive activities and imprisoned for two years. He asked to be sent to the Jewish ghetto at Lodz, but the Gestapo shipped him to Dachau concentration camp. Old and worn-out from the abuse in prison, Father Lichtenberg died in a cattle car on his way to the camp. It was November 5, 1943. He was sixty-eight years old. At his funeral in Berlin, more than 4,000 people came to pay their respects to this heroic man who "spoke and acted independently and fearlessly".⁽¹⁾ He was beatified in 1996 along with a fellow German, Karl Leisner.



Blessed Karl Leisner

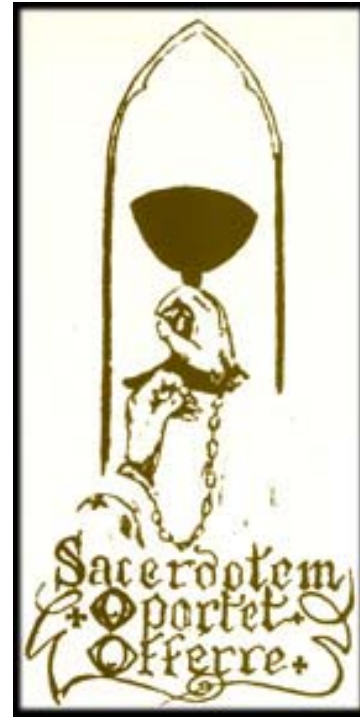
Karl was born in Rees-an-Rhein, Germany, on February 28, 1915, the oldest of five children. When he was six years old, the family moved to Cleves, a city on the lower Rhine, where Karl's father worked as a civil servant. Growing up, Karl became an altar boy and joined the Catholic youth group. These youth groups combined prayer with outdoor activities, such as camping and cycling. Karl turned out to be a natural leader and became a youth leader in the 1930's as the Nazis were beginning to take control of all youth organizations. In order to avoid Nazi interference, Karl would often take his group on camping trips to Holland or Belgium. In 1934, when he was nineteen, Karl entered the seminary. On March 25, 1939, he was ordained a deacon. Shortly after his ordination, during a medical examination, the doctor told the new deacon he had tuberculosis. In those days, the only "cure"

for TB was good food and fresh air. These were to be found in a sanitarium in the Black Forest, where Karl began to recover. It was during his recovery that a fellow patient heard Karl criticize Adolph Hitler. The Gestapo arrested him as a political prisoner in 1939, when he was twenty-five. In December of 1940, the young deacon was sent to Dachau where he became prisoner No. 22,356. Since he was a deacon, Karl lived in the priests' block. He shared his rations and was an inspiration to his fellow prisoners for his cheerfulness and helpfulness. The young deacon often said, "We bear all this for the sake of our young people."⁽²⁾

Unfortunately, the cold weather, poor rations and harsh treatment proved a dangerous combination for someone already susceptible to TB. The prisoners often had to work outside in snow or rain and then had to sleep in their wet prison clothes. Such conditions caused Karl's TB to become active. Then, during an inspection, two SS guards beat Karl unconscious and he spent several hours on the floor of his hut. By March 1942, he was spitting blood. He was forced to report to the infirmary where medical experiments were known to be performed. He was put in a room that was crowded with over one hundred TB patients. In Dachau, there was never any attempt to cure a disease and very little care was given to the sick. During inspections of the infirmary, any patient thought to be incurable was executed.

On two occasions Karl was secretly taken back to the priests' block to avoid being classified as "incurable". In the midst of his illness and his own inner feelings of despair and self-pity, Karl was still able to help others; he visited the sick and secretly prayed with them. He arranged for priests to sneak into the infirmary to hear confessions and distribute Holy Communion. Karl's condition continued to worsen. In September of 1944, a French bishop, Gabriel Pignet, was sent to Dachau. With a bishop now available, plans were made to ordain Karl to the priesthood. The necessary materials would need to be made in the camp or brought in secretly. First, Karl's bishop had to give his permission, which he did. Then the chrism (holy oil) and book containing the prayers were also necessary. Some of the prisoners had outside contacts and so were able to obtain these items. Prisoners who worked in different workshops of the camp were able to secretly make vestments for the bishop; including the miter, crosier and even a bishop's ring. Karl's ordination was scheduled for December 17, 1944. The SS guards, suspicious because of the extra activity, were told there was going to be a special celebration for Advent. Father Lenz, a prisoner at Dachau, describes the ceremony: "It was a memorable occasion that winter Sunday morning, as the Bishop made his way in slow procession from the hut across to the chapel. His episcopal vestments were worn over his striped prison uniform and his mitre covered his shaved head. In-

stead of some great cathedral he was entering a humble chapel in a concentration camp. More than a thousand priests had crowded into the chapel for this unique ceremony."⁽³⁾



Bl. Karl's ordination card, painted by a fellow-prisoner. "A priest must offer up."

Although he was extremely weak, Karl was able to make it through the ordination ceremony. Afterwards, he had to go right back to the infirmary. It wasn't until December 26, that the new priest had the strength to offer his first Mass. Usually, the first Mass of a newly ordained priest is followed by a celebration. The Lutheran ministers in Dachau arranged such a celebration. Somehow, they managed to get hold of coffee and cake and even put flowers on the table. After Mass and the celebration, the new priest again had to return to his bed. Finally, on April

29, 1945, five years since his imprisonment, Dachau was liberated by American troops. Still on his sickbed, Father Karl wept for joy. On May 4, Father Karl was taken to a hospital near Munich to live his last days as comfortably as possible. Although visitors were able to receive the priest's blessing, Father Karl never had the strength to say another Mass. His first Mass at Dachau had also been his last. Shortly before he died, he wrote in his diary: "Love—charity—atonement. O God, bless my enemies!" ⁽⁴⁾

He died on August 12, 1945. He was beatified in 1996 along with Father Bernard Lichtenberg.



Blessed Rupert Mayer

“Apostle of Munich”

Rupert was born in Stuttgart, Germany, on January 23, 1876. The Mayer family consisted of four girls and two boys who were raised in a Christian environment. Growing up, Rupert enjoyed games, music and sports. He was ordained to the priesthood in 1899, and a year later entered the Society of Jesus (Jesuits). Father Mayer began his priestly ministry in the city of Munich. When World War I began in 1914, Father Mayer volunteered to be a military chaplain. Where the fighting was fiercest, the priest was there, often crawling on the ground to reach the men who were wounded or dying. The stipend he received from the government was spent on items that would help the soldiers he served. In 1915, he was awarded the Iron Cross, the first military chaplain to receive this award for heroism in carrying out his spiritual duties. In 1916, he was so seriously wounded by a grenade that

his leg had to be amputated. His military service was at an end and so Father Mayer returned to Munich where he resumed his work among the people of that city and became known as the “limping priest”.⁽⁵⁾

After Germany’s defeat in World War I, the country was thrown into confusion and despair. People needed food and they also needed to be warned of the dangers present in Communism and National Socialism. During this time, Father Mayer helped those in need materially as well as spiritually, spending hours in the confessional and in helping all who came to him. Because he was an outspoken defender of the Church and willing to openly oppose any distortion of the truth, Father Mayer inevitably came into conflict with the Nazi government. The priest even publicly stated that no German Catholic could be a National Socialist. On May 28, 1937, Father Mayer received notification that he was banned from preaching. Since he ignored the ban, he was arrested by the Gestapo in June. At his trial, he was sentenced to six months in prison and forbidden to preach. The prison sentence was suspended and the priest was permitted to remain at a retreat house where he was kept under surveillance. He was arrested again in January, 1938, released in May, 1938, and rearrested in November, 1939. In December of 1939, he was deported to Sachsenhausen concentration camp where he remained for the next eight months. At Sachsenhausen, Father

Mayer's health failed and the Nazis were afraid the priest's death would make him a martyr. So, in August, 1940, he was taken to Ettal Abbey in Southern Bavaria and placed under house arrest. This forced inactivity; not being able to preach and unable to help those in need, caused him great suffering. He wrote from the Abbey: "From now on, although alive, I am a dead man."⁽⁶⁾

But with the faith he had nurtured from his youth, he knew through his prayer and sacrifices he could still help his people. When he was finally released after the war, in May, 1945, he immediately returned to Munich and to his work; again helping those who had been defeated. Father Mayer never recovered from the ill-treatment he had received. Exhausted and worn down, he died on November 1, 1945, just six months after returning to his beloved Munich. He was beatified in 1987.

Father Mayer's Favorite Prayer

Lord, let happen whatever you will;
and as you will, so will I walk;
help me only to know your will!
Lord, whenever you will,
then is the time;
today and always.

Lord, whatever you will, I wish to accept,
and whatever you will for me is gain;
enough that I belong to you.
Lord, because you will it, it is right;
and because you will it, I have courage.
My heart rests safely in your hands!⁽⁷⁾



Saint Edith Stein

“Teresa Benedicta of the Cross”

Edith was born in Breslau, Germany (now part of Poland), on October 12, 1891, into an Orthodox Jewish family. The youngest of seven children, Edith lost her father when she was two years old and it fell to her hardworking mother to provide for the family. Edith was brilliant and her constant seeking and questioning led her to declare while still young that she was an atheist. Although she observed the external practices of Judaism to please her mother, Edith sought philosophic truth in place of religious truth. Upon entering the University of Breslau, she began the study of philosophy. During World War I, Edith took time out from her studies to serve as a nurse on the Eastern Front. Upon returning to school and earning

her doctorate, Edith was considered one of the best and brightest philosophers of the day. One night, after reading the autobiography of Saint Teresa of Avila, Edith realized she had found the truth for which she had been searching. On January 1, 1922, at the age of thirty, Edith was baptized into the Catholic Church. From the time of her baptism until her entry into the Carmelite order a decade later, Edith led a life of prayer and activity. She provided teacher-training courses to Dominican teaching nuns and lectured on woman's place in contemporary society, all the while spending many hours in prayer. In 1933, Edith entered the cloistered Carmelite convent in Cologne, Germany. Now she was a true spiritual daughter of Saint Teresa of Avila, the Carmelite mystic whose writings had led her to the Church. Edith's conversion to Catholicism and her entry into a religious order pained her mother deeply. Edith accepted this suffering in union with Jesus' suffering on the cross. While at the Carmel in Cologne, she wrote a commentary on the works of St. John of the Cross entitled "The Science of the Cross". She also received a new name, Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. On April 21, 1938, she made her final vows as a Carmelite. By this time, Hitler had been in power for five years and as the danger for Jews increased, Sister Teresa's superiors became concerned for her safety. On December 31, 1938, Sister Teresa and her sister Rosa, also a convert to Catholicism, traveled to the Carmelite convent in

Echt, Holland. From Holland, the two sisters hoped to reach Switzerland, a neutral country. Unfortunately, by 1940, Holland was occupied by the German army and the deportation of Jews began. Sister Teresa Benedicta and Rosa were safe for the time being because of their conversion. While at Echt, Sister Teresa wrote, "The Crucified demands that we should follow Him".⁽⁸⁾



Horrified by the deportation of Dutch Jews, the Catholic bishops of Holland wrote a pastoral letter condemning the German actions. In retaliation, Catholic Jews were arrested and deported. On August 2, 1942, the two Jewish Catholic sisters were arrested. As they were led away, Edith told her sister, "Come, Rosa, we are going for our people." On August 7, they were

shipped to Auschwitz. Both women died in the gas chambers shortly after reaching the camp. The day was either August 9 or 10, 1942. At Sister Teresa Benedicta's canonization in 1998, Pope John Paul II said: "A young woman in search of the truth has become a saint and a martyr through the silent workings of divine grace."⁽⁹⁾

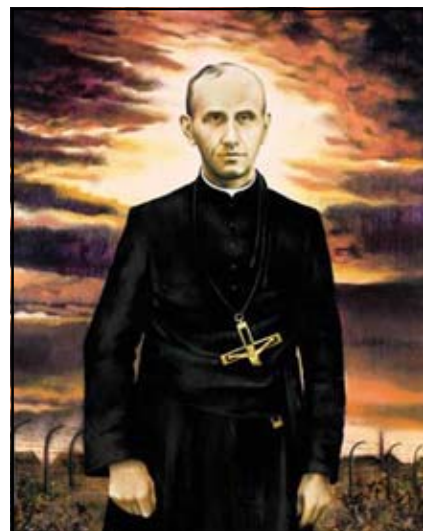
The new saint has been declared a copatroness of Europe, along with Saint Bridget and Saint Catherine of Siena.



Blessed Joseph Cebula

Joseph was born on March 23, 1902, in Upper Silesia (German Territory). He was studying to be a teacher when, in 1918, he developed seemingly fatal tuberculosis. After an unexpected recovery, Joseph entered the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI). He was ordained to the priesthood in 1927 and immediately began teaching. In 1937, Father Joseph was appointed novice master for the community. A novice master is responsible for the spiritual formation of the new members of a religious community. It is a position normally given to the most capable and most spiritual of the members. On May 4, 1940, the novices were taken to the concentration camp at Dachau. Father Cebula was able to carry on his priestly ministry in secret until his arrest on April 2, 1940. Sixteen days later he was taken to the Mauthausen concentration camp. Father Cebula only survived twenty-one days in this camp. Since he was a priest, he was beaten, in-

sulted and even ordered to hang himself. He was then assigned to the punishment company. The work this company of prisoners had to do was to carry heavy rocks on their shoulders to another camp. On the way to the camp, there was a staircase called the "Death Stairs". The prisoners had to climb these steps, with their rocks, while they were insulted and beaten by the guards. Some of the men, in despair, threw themselves against the electric fence, others jumped to their death. Father Cebula made two such trips when his strength failed him. "Gathering his remaining strength, he railed against the guards and the SS, reproaching them for their cruelty and threatening them with God's punishment".⁽¹⁰⁾ For this bold outburst, a guard shot the priest in the back. Father Joseph was killed and cremated on May 9, 1941. He was beatified with a group of one hundred and eight Polish martyrs in 1999.



Footnotes

1. Matthew Bunson, Margaret Bunson and Stephen Bunson, John Paul II's Book of Saints, (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1999), p. 113.

2. Archbishop M.N. L.Murville, Karl Leisner: Priest in Dachau, (Catholic Truth Society, 1988), 16.

3. Father John M. Lenz, Christ in Dachau, (Vienna, Austria, 1960), 200.

4. Lenz, 200.

5. Paul Molinari, S.J., Rupert Mayer: Apostle of Munich, (Dublin: Irish Messenger Publications, 1988), 20.

6. Molinari, 40.

7. Molinari, 26-27.

8. Boniface Hanley, OFM, No Strangers to Violence, No Strangers to Love, (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1983), 57.

9. Bunson, 22.

10. Father Joseph Pielorz, quoted in OMI INFORMATION, www.omiusa.org.