

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: Holland



The Löb (Loeb) Family

Like their more famous fellow martyr Edith Stein (Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross), seven members of one Jewish-Catholic family gave their lives in witness to their faith and in fidelity to their Jewish heritage.

The parents of this remarkable family were Jewish converts to Catholicism. Ludwig and Johanna were baptized shortly before their marriage in 1906. They settled in the town of Bergen op Zoom in Holland, where the family welcomed eight new members into the family; four girls and four boys. The parents, especially the father, were devout and raised their children in a home where faith was an everyday part of life, not something reserved for Sundays.

In such a family it may have seemed natural for one or two members of the family to have a vocation to the religious life. One or two perhaps—but six out of eight? It began in 1926, when the oldest son George entered the Cistercian Abbey of Koningshoeven. Robert and Ernst would soon join their brother. George would take the name Father Ignatius, Robert was Brother Linus and Ernst, Father Nivardus. The girls in the family were not to be outdone in generosity. Like the oldest son, the oldest daughter entered a Trappistine monastery where she was later joined by her twin sisters. Lina became Mother Hedwig, Dora became Mother Maria Theresia and Wies was Mother Veronica. Only Hans and Paula, the two youngest children remained at home. By the time the Second World War came to Holland, the Löb parents had died. Catholic Jews, such as the Löb family, did not seem to be in any immediate danger from the Germans who now occupied their country. However, seeing the treatment of the Jews in Holland, the Catholic bishops issued a public letter condemning Nazi atrocities and deportations of Jews. In retaliation, any Catholic of Jewish descent was to be arrested and deported to the death camps.

On August 2, 1942, the Trappistine nuns were in chapel saying their night prayers when the SS arrived. After re-

ceiving Holy Communion, Mother Hedwig and Mother Theresia calmly said good-bye to their sisters. Mother Veronika, who was very ill with tuberculosis, was allowed to remain behind.

Since the Trappistine convent was near the Cistercian Monastery, the next stop was to arrest the Löb brothers. They too were in chapel for night prayers when the soldiers came. Threatening to shoot ten monks if the Löb brothers did not come with them, the SS still allowed Fathers Ignatius and Nivardus time to say Mass. If the Löb brothers and sisters were frightened, the fear was momentarily forgotten when the three brothers were taken to the car and they saw their two sisters whom they had not seen in over ten years. Imagine the family reunion! According to reports, there was quite a bit of gaiety in the car during their drive to their destination.

First, they were taken to Amersfoort where other Catholic Jews were waiting. The next stop was Westerbork in Germany. Witnesses who survived say the Löb brothers and sisters worked among the prisoners; helping, consoling and doing what they could to relieve the fear and grief that surrounded them. The stay at Westerbork was not long. They were transported to Auschwitz and by September of 1942, five members of the Löb family had perished. The only detailed information of their deaths regards Fathers Ignatius and Nivardus who were reportedly shot with four other priests for hearing the confessions of prisoners.

And what of the remaining three members of the family? Mother Veronika was eventually arrested by the Nazis and deported to Westerbork but was released after a few days. Still sick, she was allowed to return to her convent to die in August of 1944. Hans, the youngest brother was also arrested by the Nazis and sent to Auschwitz, where he died in February 1945. Only Paula, the youngest child who had married and been hidden by a Catholic family during the Nazi persecution, survived the war. The process for beatification of the Löb family is underway.



Saint Titus Brandsma

Titus was born Anno Sjoerd Brandsma on February 23, 1881. Young Anno grew up on the family farm in Friesland, a province in the northwest part of Holland. His father and mother raised their six children in an atmosphere of piety and hard work. The family attended daily Mass and when the farm chores were finished, many happy hours were spent singing and dancing. Although always willing to work hard, Anno was never physically strong enough to help with many of the heavy farm chores. In September of 1898, the young man entered the Carmelite monastery in Boxmeer, Holland. When he became a novice, Anno began a new way of life that was marked by receiving a new

name. Henceforth, he would be called Titus, after his father. At this monastery, Titus followed the Carmelite rule and studied. His cell (room) was simple and he slept on a straw mattress. During his novitiate, Brother Titus discovered he had a talent for writing and translating. He translated several works by St. Teresa of Avila, wrote religious articles and began a magazine for the Carmelites. Unfortunately, Brother Titus often “overdid” it and he would become ill. In spite of his ill health, Brother Titus was able to maintain his good humor, his calmness, and his gentleness. His ordination to the holy priesthood occurred on June 7, 1905. After his ordination, Father Titus began his work of teaching philosophy and theology to seminarians, writing religious articles and translating spiritual works. In the midst of this activity he never neglected his spiritual life or the welfare of others. He never hesitated to stop his work to give his undivided attention to anyone who needed financial, spiritual or physical help. Once again, he overtaxed himself. In the summer of 1921, he spent several weeks hovering between life and death after suffering a severe hemorrhage. In 1923, he became a professor at a new Catholic university in Holland. Due to his background in journalism, Father Titus was appointed spiritual director to the Catholic journalists of Holland. In the 1930's, as the Nazis began their rise to power in Germany, Father Titus was one who saw the evils of National Socialism. In his articles and lectures he warned his stu-

dents against Hitler. Holland fell to Germany in 1940 and immediately Jews and any outspoken critics of the new regime were rounded up. When the Catholic hierarchy protested these arrests, the Nazis responded with more persecutions. As the Nazi hold on Holland tightened, the Catholic Church was being crippled. The last straw was when the Nazis told Dutch Catholic newspapers they had to print Nazi propaganda. In effect, Catholic newspapers would become tools of the enemy. The bishops' response was "NO!" It was up to Father Titus to personally visit and explain to the Catholic newspaper editors what they could and could not do as Catholics. Father Titus traveled from city to city encouraging the editors to adhere to Catholic principles and not give in to Nazi threats. The priest knew he was a marked man but he was able to reach fourteen of the editors before he was arrested at his monastery on January 19, 1942. After three months in prison he was deported to Amersfoort in central Holland where he became prisoner No. 58 and was assigned to a work detail that cleared a forest of trees and stumps. For the prisoners, poorly fed, poorly clothed and without proper equipment, many became sick and many despaired. Patients in the overcrowded hospital were often laid in the muddy streets where the rain and cold brought death. Those who survived this work camp spoke of Father Titus' courage and generosity, often giving a portion of his rations to help others. Although the punishment for giving

spiritual help was punishable by death, Father Titus never let this deter him from leading prisoners in meditation, giving blessings and hearing confessions. In the midst of terror, the priest counseled his fellow prisoners to pray for their Nazi captors. When some prisoners mentioned that it was very difficult to pray for their captors, the priest gently replied, "You don't have to pray for them all day long."⁽¹⁾ Once again, Father Titus became ill. In June, 1942, he was sent to Dachau, seemingly more dead than alive. Like his fellow priest-prisoners, Father Titus was given "special" treatment of extra beatings and extra work. Added to this was a severe foot infection. Often, at the end of a workday, his fellow prisoners had to carry him back to his barracks. Many prisoners suffered much but this frail man bore all his suffering with calmness and gentleness. One prisoner said he "radiated with cheerful courage".⁽²⁾ He appealed to his fellow prisoners not to yield to the darkness of hatred because the light of eternity was shining. He avoided the hospital in Dachau as long as he could. Eventually, it was unavoidable. He went into the hospital in late July, was experimented on, and on Sunday, July 26, 1942, the doctor ordered him injected with a deadly drug. He was dead in ten minutes. Father Titus was canonized in 2022.

Footnotes

1. Hanley, No Strangers to Violence, 198.
2. Ibid., 200.