
GERTRUD LUCKNER

Gertrud Luckner was born in Liverpool in 1900. When she was six her family moved back to Germany, where her parents had come from, but she returned to England in the 1920s to study at Woodbrooke, the Quaker college in Birmingham. During the holidays she worked in the slums as a hospital almoner. She was impressed by people in need helping themselves - for example through the clubs run by the unemployed in South Wales at that time.

In 1931 she settled back in Germany, in the university town of Freiburg. She was shocked to see the influence of Nazi propaganda, particularly among students. So Gertrud did something about it. She told the headteachers of secondary schools in Freiburg that she was organising a discussion group where their pupils could practise English. She supplied pro-and anti-Nazi tracts for parliamentary-style debates, encouraging students to think critically about political issues.

From person to person

Gertrud's application of "self-help" in a situation dominated by Nazi restrictions depended very much on her circle of personal friends and contacts. These included people she met through her discussion groups, those she knew through her membership of the German Catholic Peace Movement (before it was banned), and friends she had made in England - for example in the youth hostels association - and in America. She was a networker who put

people in touch with one another. Her friends abroad became an important escape route when Jewish families needed visas to enable them to emigrate.

Gertrud was a Catholic and, to her, religion was about compassion, reaching out, "from person to person" across the boundaries of different faiths, races, or nationalities. She was deeply concerned about what was affecting other people's daily lives.



Each week she collected the foreign newspapers discarded by the university library. That way she could read the news that was not being reported in German papers. "I wanted to know," she said later, "others did not". Many German citizens had no idea that their Jewish neighbours were being deprived of their rights, losing their homes and jobs,

and that eventually they were taken to extermination camps. But Gertrud made enquiries to find out what was really going on around her.

Before the transportation of Jews to concentration camps began, many of them were sent to work long hours in factories. However, Jews were only allowed to go to the shops between four and six in the afternoon. This meant they could not easily buy food. When she heard this, Gertrud organised some of her women friends to do the shopping for these Jewish families.

"I thought: 'You must always comfort them. The only thing I can do is walk the way together with them.' The whole thing had been so terrible - the deportations, one city after another - so that it really did not much matter any more what happened to me."

After Kristallnacht - the night of 9-10th November 1938, when Jewish businesses, synagogues and homes were burned all over Germany - Gertrud cycled round Freiburg, visiting Jewish neighbours in friendship and solidarity.

Walking the way together

She had got to know two elderly Jewish ladies, living on their own in a large house, who were terrified of being deported by the Gestapo. Gertrud simply stayed with them every night for three weeks to reassure and protect them. They escaped because Gertrud sought out very precise information from sympathetic officials about what was going on. If old people were about to be transported, she got some Freiburg doctors to have elderly Jews admitted to hospital, so they could not be moved. If a labour transport was rumoured, she persuaded a local industrialist to say he could not spare any of his Jewish workforce, and even to take on more men.

In Freiburg Gertrud worked with the Catholic bishops' Caritas organisation and was put in charge of its Bureau for War Aid. This enabled her to travel all over Germany and Austria, collecting information about the situation of Jews in other cities, warning those in danger, distributing Caritas funds, bringing news to families worried about their relatives, and finding ingenious ways of helping.

The simplicity of her direct and practical approach makes her so exceptional. In 1941, when baptised Jews were required to wear the Star of David, Gertrud asked the local clergy what they were going to do. "I will dispense them from coming to church" said one pastor. Gertrud's solution was different: those without stars would pick them up from their homes and accompany them to services. She got the addresses, and all day on Sunday she walked with the baptised Jews to Protestant and Catholic churches where other parishioners came up to greet them.

Gertrud realised that the way to fight discrimination and persecution was to treat people as dignified and normal human beings. Whenever she was visiting Berlin she made a point of going up to Jews wearing the Star of David to ask for directions. "I did not want them to feel isolated," she said.

Much of Gertrud's work had to be done secretly to prevent Nazi officials from finding out. She used code words and took great care, but despite her prudence Gertrud was arrested in 1943. Later, she described how she felt when this happened and she could no longer offer practical help to the persecuted. "I thought: you must always comfort them. The only thing I can do is walk the way together with them."

Gertrud Luckner survived nine weeks of interrogation in Ravensbrück concentration camp. After the war, she founded a journal dedicated to improving Jewish-Christian relations. She received many decorations, has a place in the Avenue of the Righteous in Jerusalem, and died, aged 94, in Freiburg.

Read:

*Ministers of Compassion During the Nazi Period
Gertrud Luckner and Raoul Wallenberg*
Institute of Judaeo-Christian Studies, Seton Hall
University, New Jersey. Price £3

*The Leaves have Lost their Trees: the longterm
effects of a refugee childhood on German
Jewish children who escaped the Nazi regime.*
Dorothy Darke, William Sessions, York. Price £8

Both available from Pax Christi

*Acknowledgement: Photograph of Gertrud
Luckner from www.denktag.de*

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