

Franziska's story

Franziska Jägerstätter was born on 4 March 1913 and grew up on a farm in Hochburg, 12 km from St Radegund. The Schwaninger family was very religious: her father and grandmother were both members of the Marian Congregation, and her grandmother was also a Third Order Franciscan. Franziska was an active youth leader in her parish.

From 1934 onwards she worked as a dairy and kitchen maid at a nearby inn. Thinking about entering a convent, she and one of the waitresses went to see the Vocklabruck School Sisters who ran a kindergarden in Ranshofen. They were told to come back in 6 months - probably, Franziska thought later, because they were too frivolous and giggly.



Franziska met Franz at a social event in 1935, when she was earning some extra money, setting up bowling pins. He had inherited the farm in St Radegund two years before, when his step-father Heinrich Jägerstätter had died of TB, aged 49. In 1933 Franz had also fathered an illegitimate daughter, Hildegard, but his mother had opposed a marriage to Theresia Auer. Before marrying Franziska in 1936, Franz went with her to visit the Auer family and asked if they might adopt Hildegard. Their offer was rejected, but Franz remained close to his daughter and wrote a farewell letter to her and Theresia from prison.

Franz and Franziska married on Maundy Thursday, 9 April 1936, at six in the morning. They did not wait for the funeral that same day of Franz's cousin and foster sister, Aloisia Sommerauer, who had also died of TB. Instead, Franz and Franziska immediately set out on a honeymoon pilgrimage to Rome. This was very unusual (and expensive). They had an audience with Pope Pius XI and visited Naples and Sorrento.

Franz was 28; Franziska was 23. After their marriage Franz started to take religion much more seriously, joining his wife in First Friday devotions and frequent Communion. They read the bible together. Others attributed to Franziska her husband's religious conversion. She later said: "We helped one another to go forward in faith". It was clearly a great consolation to them both when he was in prison and they frequently mention the great feasts and seasons of the Church: May devotions, Corpus Christi, and so on. But much more than that, their faithful obedience to God was the source of their steadfast rejection of the sinful demands of Hitler's state.

In seven affectionate years of life together they used to plan little surprises and gifts for one another. Franz was an unusually hands-on father for those days, wheeling his children round in their pram. Separation was very difficult and he often referred in letters from prison to their domestic happiness. A month after her husband's death Franziska wrote to Fr Kreuzberg, the Berlin prison



Franz Jägerstätter 1907-1943

chaplain, to thank him for visiting Franz. "I have lost a dear husband and a good father to my children, and I can also assure you that our marriage was one of the happiest in our parish – many people envied us. But the good Lord intended otherwise, and has loosed that loving bond. I already look forward to meeting again in heaven, where no war can ever divide us again."



"Dear father, come soon!"

Franziska soon had to get used to managing the farm on her own. When Franz was called up for the first period of military service in 1940, her mother-in-law Rosalia was in hospital, and she had only just had their third child. Franz told her not to worry about the farm: her children came first. Franziska's father, Lorenz Schwaninger, who always got on well with Franz, helped out.

After Franz returned from that military service determined that he would not serve again, he and Franziska had two years of anxious anticipation that he would be called up again. There were arguments

with his mother who could not understand his attitude. She drew in neighbours and relations to try and "bring him to his senses" and complained that she felt shut out of the couple's deliberations. Franziska said of this time: "In the beginning, I really begged him not to put his life at stake, but then when everyone was quarrelling with him and scolding him.. I didn't do it any more...", and: "If I had not stood by him he would have had no one."

Their parting on 27 February 1943 at the station in Tittmoning was very traumatic and they clung on to each other's hands until the train pulled out. Franziska did not visit Franz in prison in Linz because she did not want to repeat the distressing experience.

On 1 March, before reporting to the barracks and announcing his refusal, Franz wrote to Franziska, thanking her for her love and loyalty and for the sacrifices which lay ahead. He urged her to entrust her pain to Christ. "Also, don't be angry with my mother if she doesn't understand us." Rosalia always held it against Franziska that she had not done more to influence Franz against refusing.

Franziska had to take care of all the farm work when he was in prison and reported to Franz how it was going. At Corpus Christi, despite her heavy work, she made a pilgrimage on foot to Altötting: "I almost couldn't get up to do the mowing the next day, but it simply had to be done".



Franziska with her mother-in-law, Rosalia, and the three girls

The children, Rosalia (b.1937), Maria (b.1938) and Aloisia (b.1940) missed their father badly. Rosi cried for him at night and would not let her mother lock the door in case her daddy could not get in.

In July 1943, after Franz's trial, Franziska made the long journey to Berlin with Fr Fürthauer, the parish priest. They were only allowed 20 minutes with the condemned man, most of which was taken up by the priest trying to persuade him to change his mind. The guards stopped her from giving Franz some of the food she had brought. They hugged for the last time and knelt together for the priest's blessing.

After Franz's death

After Franz's execution Franziska suffered greatly materially, socially and psychologically.

Subsidies and privileges controlled by the Nazi Party were distributed to compliant farmers, so she was disadvantaged in the running of the farm and did not receive the supplies she needed. An application for cement was rejected once she gave her name. Butchers tried to cheat her on several occasions by giving her less than a fair price for her animals.

Even after the war local officials discriminated against those who had opposed Hitler. Right until the end of rationing Franziska received no coupons for clothing or shoes for herself and the children. She knitted clothes from the wool of angora rabbits.

Franziska was denied the pension allocated to widows and orphans. The authorities argued that the legislation compensating victims only applied to those who had fought for a free and democratic Austria - which did not include Franz, they claimed, because his opposition to National Socialism was based on religious conviction. He had been depressed or insane.

Franziska only won her right to a pension in 1950 after enlisting the help of a lawyer, Franz's cousin, Dr Franz Huber. Writing to the prison chaplain, Fr Kreuzberg, she described the struggle as a "torment, when I have to explain so carefully to an official every word and every deed of my husband. These gentlemen have no idea how my heart bleeds in doing so."

Whereas the many widows of soldiers won the sympathy of fellow Austrians, Franziska was shunned. Not only had she lost her husband but her neighbours rejected her, some even blaming her for his death by encouraging the religious fervour which had given rise to his conscientious objection. She was also regarded as an outsider by some residents of St Radegund.



Franziska greets visitors after the family farmhouse was opened as a museum, August 1993.

When Gordon Zahn interviewed Franziska in 1961 she described with composure her last meeting with Franz, and many other terrible events, but she broke down in tears when they discussed the behaviour of her neighbours in the village. Few, she felt, had offered her the help she so badly needed after his death, and she attributed this to their fear that they might fall under suspicion for showing sympathy towards her.

Zahn noted that: "Privacy is important to Mrs Jägerstätter. In a sense, she 'walks alone' in the community - a spare woman, reserved and soft-spoken, even withdrawn in manner." At church almost daily, he noticed that she would greet the other women with a courteous nod, but did not stop to chat.

Franziska's painful isolation only came to an end, she said later, after Fr Joseph Steinkellner became the parish priest in 1977. His frequent sermons about loving one's neighbour began to have an effect. In Austria generally public attitudes to the Second World War were also shifting.

In 1979 Erna Putz chose St Radegund as the subject for an article she was writing for the Linz diocesan paper. She was impressed by Franziska - parish sacristan and leader of the Catholic women's association - who showed her some of Franz's letters. Their friendship and collaboration developed as Erna researched more fully the Jägerstätter story.

New evidence came to light - for example, the trial documents held in Prague, which were released in 1990. In 1997 Franziska and her daughters petitioned the Public Attorney for the District Court of Berlin and were granted an official annulment of the verdict against Franz reached by the Reich Court Martial in July 1943.

Franziska guarded her husband's memory with devotion and guided, at every stage, the progress of his cause. The commemoration held on 9 August each year has brought many pilgrims to St Radegund. The family farmhouse, restored for use as a museum and education centre, contains original furnishings and personal belongings provided by Franziska. Alongside Erna Putz she personally welcomed and gave talks to groups of visitors and travelled abroad to exhibitions and events honouring Franz.



In the decades following Gordon Zahn's interview with her, Franziska conducted many more, and had to explain many times over the reasons for her husband's resistance. The days of animosity and isolation were over. She became used to public appearances, and was honoured in her own right by political and church leaders. In 2007 she was awarded Austria's highest decoration, a gold cross of merit. Franziska was gracious and joyful - joining in the drinks and chatter in the local gasthaus after special celebrations. Yet she retained a gentle shyness and reserve. As with Mary, you sensed that there was much she kept in her heart.

In October 2007, at the age of 94 and surrounded by her daughters, grandchildren and great grandchildren, Franziska took a major part in the beatification ceremonies in Linz cathedral when the Catholic Church officially honoured Franz Jägerstätter as a blessed martyr. In a spontaneous expression of unity and warmth the congregation gave her a long, standing ovation. Everyone present felt that this recognition of Franz's sacrificial holiness was in truth and justice equally appropriate for his wife, Franziska. She died in March 2013, shortly after her 100th birthday.

Valerie Flessati

"Over the years, Franz and Franziska have been a model for me of what the cost of discipleship might be. They and their children have been 'martyrs' in the truest meaning of that word: 'witnesses'..."

"The witness for which we honour Franz Jägerstätter was a joint witness. His decision to resist to the death was made with Franziska. It was not made without pain or terrible soul-searching for both of them, but it was made with humble clarity of conscience. His was the dramatic action; hers to live out that act of resistance..."

"Theirs is a marriage that never broke the communion of life - the active resister with God; the woman of faith and endurance, struggling to live daily in the presence of God. It is a marriage consecrated to the work of peace."

Bishop Thomas Gumbleton, at a celebration to mark the 80th birthday of Franz Jägerstätter, 1987