



PAX



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Peace People Series

FRANZ JÄGERSTÄTTER

At 4pm on 9th August, 1943, a 37-year-old Austrian farmer was taken from his prison cell in Brandenburg, near Berlin, marched in chains to a desk where his death sentence was again read out, pushed into another room where the executioner was waiting, and beheaded. His name was Franz Jägerstätter and that should have been the end of the story. And the end it was, for a long time - at least for the rest of the world. However, this was certainly not true for his widow, his young daughters and for the villagers of St Radegund, a tiny place in Upper Austria, just a few hundred yards from the German border.

Franz grew up in St Radegund and was well known as a wild youth. He introduced the first motorbike to the village, took part in not a few brawls with youngsters from other villages, and fathered an illegitimate child.

His life began to change with marriage in 1937. His wife Franziska, pious and quiet, certainly influenced Franz, but his developing interest in the roots of his religion came also from his own reading and thinking. His strong vocal opposition to Hitler's take-over of Austria in 1938 is well remembered in St Radegund.

Conscription

He was conscripted on 17th June, 1940, but after basic training was sent back to his village in April 1941 to carry on with farm work.

At that time he did not refuse military service, though he told his wife that the Nazi uniform made him "*feel dirty*". His recall came in February 1943 as Hitler was beginning to scrape the manpower barrel.

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By then Franz's views had been firmly formed. He now took his Christianity very seriously indeed, had become a church sacristan, and was very friendly with his parish priest, a first-world war hero who shared his views but did not advise him to refuse military service. Jägerstätter's convictions about the wickedness of the war did not waver. It was one in which Christians should play no part. Without any moral or legal right, the Nazis were invading other countries.

Conscientious objection?

There is no evidence that Jägerstätter ever became an absolute pacifist. His was a judgment on the facts of a particular regime and a particular war. He took himself off to the Bishop of Linz to ask for advice and was told to forget his objections and to do his duty: who was he to know all the facts, and anyway this was a war against Bolshevism.

"I am convinced that it is still best that I speak the truth even though it costs me my life. For you will not find it written in any of the commandments of God or of the Church that a man is obliged under pain of sin to take an oath committing him to obey what might be commanded of him by his secular ruler. We need no rifles or pistols for our battle, but instead spiritual weapons - and the foremost of these is prayer."

The bishop's advice reflected also the legal situation. There was no provision for conscientious objection.

As Franz walked out of his village that February, heading for the recruiting depot at Enns, a friend shouted: "God go with you Franz". The answer came back quietly: "You will see no more of me".

His court martial took place on 14th July 1943, and even then renewed efforts were made, in a quite humane way, to get him to change his mind. There is now a conflict of evidence as to whether or not he was willing to serve in a non-combatant capacity. The trial record, discovered in Prague, says that he was, but there is nothing to support this in his own letters and, if it were true, then the sentence of death is not easily explained.

"My dearest, beloved wife, and all my children," he wrote on the morning of his execution, "Many actually believe quite simply that things have to be the way they are. If this should happen to mean that they are obliged to commit injustice then they believe that others are responsible... For this reason I am convinced that it is still best that I speak the truth even if it costs my life... These few words are being set down here as they come from my mind and heart. And if I must write them with my hands in chains, I find that much better than if my will were in chains."

Franziska respected her husband's conscience and did not put undue pressure on him to change his mind - as she might well have done, granted her situation and their three very young children. Theirs was a deeply spiritual partnership of faith. She suffered great hardship after his death, managing the farm, bringing up the children, and enduring the scorn of those who thought Franz had been a traitor.

Twenty years after his death, Franz Jägerstätter's story began to spread around the world with dramatic effect. It was related at the Vatican Council by Archbishop Thomas Roberts, SJ, and must have played some part in getting the Catholic Church to change its official attitude to conscientious objection. Reaction in Austria was initially not very warm. The Church authorities made efforts to suppress the story. In St Radegund itself the attempt to put Franz's name on the war memorial met with strong opposition, though it got there in the end.

Gradually over time Austrians came to recognise the extraordinary faith and courage of their fellow countryman, Franz, for refusing to fight for Hitler when so many did. In 2007 Franziska and his daughters were present in Linz Cathedral when the Catholic Church beatified Franz Jägerstätter and officially honoured him as a martyr who had put his love and obedience to God above everything.

Read:

Franz Jägerstätter: a different kind of hero
Pax Christi 2008 Revised 2023. Price £6

Franz Jägerstätter - Christian and Martyr.
Illustrated account of the life and influence of Blessed Franz. Pax Christi / Diocese of Linz 2010
Price £7

Franz Jägerstätter Martyr - a shining example in dark times by Erna Putz. Diocese of Linz/Franz Steinmassl 2007. Price £10

Follow Me; The Way of the Cross - with reflections taken from the writings of Blessed Franz Jägerstätter Pax Christi 2009. Price £2.50

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