

In front of the Reich Court-Martial in Berlin

A sudden move

On 4th May 1943, Franz Jägerstätter sent a short note to his wife from Linz railway station, telling her that he was just about to be taken to Berlin; he gave his new address as: “Berlin-Tegel Military Remand Prison, Seidelstrasse 39”. During a stay at Regensburg, he was able to write at greater length, and the obligingness of his guard enabled him to write an uncensored letter: “I’m taking the train for Berlin at half past two with a man from Berlin as my escort, a very kind man.” Franz Jägerstätter regretted that his departure from Linz came so suddenly that he was not even able to say goodbye to his fellow-prisoners. His stance on Nazism had only been strengthened by his two months’ imprisonment. He did not expect any improvement in his situation. However, inwardly he felt forearmed – the crises of his initial period in prison had evidently been overcome: “You’ve no need to worry about my spiritual state. If it maybe goes even worse for me in Berlin, don’t fret yourselves because of it ... I’m still ready to meet everything calmly.”¹²⁴ Both Franz and Franziska deeply regretted that they had never managed to meet while he was imprisoned in nearby Linz; on 7th May, he wrote: “If I’d had any idea that I would have to leave Linz without a trial, I’d certainly have invited you for a short visit beforehand, for it would be too grim for you to come all the way to Berlin.”¹²⁵ On 11th May, Franziska wrote: “I do feel very sorry that I wasn’t able to visit you while you were still in Linz.”

124 Franz to Franziska, dated 4th May 1943 (78)

125 Franz to Franziska, dated 7th May 1943 (79)

Changed prison conditions in Berlin

On 4th May at eleven at night, Franz Jägerstätter arrived in Berlin. The train journey there would have been a pleasant experience, “if it had simply been a pleasure trip.” His reception at the military remand prison at Berlin-Tegel was probably brutal. Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who had been sent there one month before, described the treatment of newcomers: “On the first night, I was locked in a cell for newly-interned prisoners; the blankets on the cot had such a beastly smell that, despite the cold, it was impossible to cover oneself with them. The next morning, a piece of bread was thrown into my cell, so that I had to pick it up from the floor. A quarter of the coffee consisted of coffee grounds. For the first time, the prison guards’ abusive name-calling of remand prisoners reached my cell, a sound that I have heard from morning to night ever since. When I had to line up with the other new prisoners, we were called vagabonds, etc. etc. by a turnkey ...”¹²⁶ Franz’s letter indicates that he was treated similarly: “As long as you have no revengeful thoughts against anyone and can forgive all men, even though sometimes you may have a hard word thrown at you, your heart remains peaceful and what lovelier thing is there in this world than peace? ...”¹²⁷ In the same letter, he also described the positive side of his new prison quarters: “... it’s true that some things are a bit different than in Linz, but from what I’ve seen up to now, you don’t have to go hungry here either, and I find some things are better here. I also have a very nice little room all to myself.” However, in Tegel correspondence is drastically restricted: in the same letter, Franz remarks: “Dearest wife, you’ll certainly find one thing harder in future, as here we’re only allowed to write one very short letter once every four weeks. We can receive as much mail as comes.” The letters from his family were, however, delivered to him only after some delay.¹²⁸ Prison was already affecting Franz Jägerstätter’s health. On 6th June, he wrote of stomach ache: “... my stomach is playing me up, the little rascal, otherwise, thank God, I still feel pretty healthy, these little disorders of the stomach are

126 Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand und Ergebung* (Resistance and Submission), p.64

127 Franz to Franziska, dated 7th May 1943 (79)

128 Cf. Franz to Franziska, dated 6th June 1943 (80)

easy to take, for it could easily be worse by now. Otherwise, I almost prefer it here to Linz in nearly every way. I'm still alone in my cell. Almost every day, we have half an hour's exercise out in the open; you can work as much as you want in the cell, making envelopes. Though of course, I'd far rather be taking the heavy work off your hands instead." In both this letter and in the one written in July, Franz says that it is a grace of God to be permitted to suffer for one's faith.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes about this period in Tegel: "Overall treatment: the turnkeys who set the tone are the ones who strike the most abusive and brutal note in speaking to the prisoners. The whole building echoes with abusive swearwords of the most foul kind, so that even the more even-tempered and fair-minded jailers feel nauseated by it; but they can hardly stand up to the others ... Food: a prisoner cannot avoid getting the impression that he's not receiving all the rations to which he is entitled ... Air raids: There is no air raid shelter for the prisoners. For the workforce at hand here, it would have been a small matter to ensure that this was done in good time ... Whenever there's a major bomb attack, no one who has heard the screaming and uproar of the prisoners locked in their cells, some of whom are in here for the most minor offenses or else completely innocent, will ever forget it."¹²⁹ Franz Jägerstätter would not live to experience the heavy air raids on Berlin of 23rd August and 3rd September 1943; however, he was one of those who experienced the terrible heat wave at the end of July and beginning of August, during which it was unbearably hot in the cells.

The religious order priest Franz Reinisch, who was to share Franz's fate at the hands of the Nazis, described the effects of the treatment in Tegel. In the isolation of the solitary cell, the smallest day-to-day harassments began to impose great strain on a man. He described them as "a foretaste of purgatory and hell: the thoughts and experiences: never a friendly face, never to feel any love, always only hard words – if this were to go on forever! And then the screaming of some prisoners who can't bear the loneliness and the wrongful loss of their freedom, the constantly keeping silent, the small cell, etc. and also, in the case of certain men, the spiritual

129 Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand und Ergebung* (Resistance and Submission), p.66

distress that weighs heavily on their hearts, the enchainment of those condemned to death.”¹³⁰

130 Reinisch, I, 29