

# Franz's death in Brandenburg

## Prepared for death

After being sentenced Franz Jägerstätter was handcuffed day and night, like the other condemned men. On 12<sup>th</sup> July, he told his wife that he was “extremely happy”. His writings in the last weeks of his life describe this happiness. They reveal strength and inner freedom: “Now I will write down a few words here, just as they come from my heart. Even though I’m writing them with bound hands – but that’s still better than if my will was bound. Sometimes God openly shows His power which He can give to man, to those who love Him and don’t put earthly above eternal things. Neither prison, nor bonds, nor even death are able to divide a person from the love of God, to rob him of his faith and free will. God’s power is invincible ... Again and again, people try to burden one’s conscience concerning wife and children. Is the deed you commit maybe supposed to be better, just because you’re married and have children? Or is the deed better or worse just because thousands of other Catholics are doing it too? ... Didn’t Christ himself say ‘He that loves wife, mother and children more than me is not worthy of me’? Then for what reason do we ask God to give us the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit if we have to offer blind obedience anyway? For what purpose has God given all people understanding and free will if, as some say, we have no right at all to decide whether this war being waged by Germany is righteous or unrighteous? Then what use is our ability to distinguish between what is good or evil? I believe it’s fine to offer blind obedience, but only if you don’t have to harm anyone else by doing it. If people were a bit more honest nowadays, I believe that many a Catholic who’s taking part would still have to say: ‘Yes, I realize the deed we’re doing here isn’t good, but I’m simply not ready to die yet.’ And if God had not granted me the grace and strength to die for my faith when called upon to do it, then maybe I’d simply do the same as the majority do. For God can give each person as much grace as He wishes. If others had received the many graces that I’ve already received, they might perhaps already have done far more good than I.”

After expressing further thoughts on sin, the sinner, hell and purgatory; Franz makes the following note near the end, in joyful anticipation of everlasting blessedness: “It really does make you dizzy when you think of the eternal joys of Heaven. How happy we feel right away when we experience some small joy here in this world – but what are the brief joys of this world compared to those that Jesus has promised us in His Kingdom? Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man the things that God has prepared for those that love Him.”<sup>162</sup>

In another passage written at this time, he encourages the family to give the children a religious education, as faith is the most precious possession: “If a person possessed all the wisdom in the world and could call the whole earth his own, he nevertheless could and would not be as happy as a poor person with almost nothing to call his own in this world except a deep Catholic faith. I wouldn’t exchange my small cell, which isn’t even clean, for the largest king’s palace, if I had to give up even a tiny portion of my faith in return – for everything earthly, however plentiful or fine it may be, comes to an end, but God’s Word remains forever.”<sup>163</sup>

## **Brandenburg, 9<sup>th</sup> August 1943**

As his writings show, Franz Jägerstätter was calm and assured after being sentenced; nevertheless, he was under enormous mental strain for the 34 days and nights between the pronouncement of the sentence and his execution. Uncertainty about the date of the execution, the screams of despair of the other prisoners and the degrading treatment make it easy to understand the wish for the torment to come to an end. In talks with the priests and in his letter of farewell he said that if death was inevitable anyway, his dearest wish was to join in celebrating the Feast of the Assumption (15<sup>th</sup> August) in Heaven.

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162 Prison note written by Franz Jägerstätter, loose sheet (88), July/August 1943. The original sheet, handwritten by Franz Jägerstätter, was presented to the memorial to Martyrs of our time in the Basilica of San Bartolomeo, Rome (Tiber Island), by Austrian Cardinal Christoph Schönborn in the presence of all Austrian bishops, on 4<sup>th</sup> November 2005.

163 Prison note by Franz Jägerstätters, Box (85), July/August 1943

In his letter of farewell, he describes the last day of his life: “Early today, at about half past five, they said ‘Get dressed immediately, the car’s already waiting’, and I was then driven here to Brandenburg with several other condemned men,<sup>164</sup> we didn’t know what was going to happen to us. It wasn’t till midday that I was told that the sentence was confirmed on the 14<sup>th</sup> and will be carried out today at four in the afternoon.”<sup>165</sup>

Franz’s words of farewell are sad but composed: “Now I want to write a few brief words of farewell to you all. Dearest wife and mother. I sincerely thank you again for everything you have done for me in my life, for all the love and sacrifice you have given for my sake, and ask you again to forgive me for everything, whenever I may have offended and hurt you, just as I forgive you everything. I also ask anyone else whom I have ever offended or hurt to forgive me for everything, particularly the Reverend Father, if I perhaps hurt him very much with my words when he visited me with you. I forgive everyone from the bottom of my heart. May God accept my life as a sacrifice of atonement, not just for my sins, but also for those of others.”<sup>166</sup>

On 9<sup>th</sup> August 1943, at 4 p.m., Franz Jägerstätter was beheaded at Brandenburg an der Havel. His wife Franziska felt very strongly connected to her husband at that moment: she made a note of the time.

She was informed of what had happened by the pastor of Brandenburg, Albert Jochmann, who had ministered to the condemned man on that last afternoon: “It is with much pain that I must inform you that this afternoon, at 4 o’clock, your husband’s sentence was carried out. I visited your husband for the first time this afternoon, in place of the absent prison chaplain; your husband was brought here only today, if I remember rightly. Before his death, he made his confession and received Communion with great devotion. He told me that you yourself and your pas-

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164 According to a text in the “Ehrenbuch für die im Zuchthaus Brandenburg-Görden ermordeten Antifaschisten” (Book of honor for the anti-fascists murdered at the Brandenburg-Görden penitentiary), Vol. 4 1943, among the sixteen people beheaded by guillotine there on 9<sup>th</sup> August 1943, seven were condemned by the Reich Court-Martial for undermining military morale: the Catholic Franz Jägerstätter, and six Jehovah’s Witnesses

165 Franz to Franziska, dated 9<sup>th</sup> August 1943 (83)

166 Franz to Franziska, dated 9<sup>th</sup> August 1943 (83)

tor had both tried to change his mind; but that he believed it was his duty to act in the way he had. It was his wish that it would come to an end before the Feast of Assumption. He once more sends his warmest greetings to you and the children. He remained self-controlled and devotional right up to the very last moments that I was with him. May the long-suffering Mother of God comfort you in your great heartbreak, and help you to bear your lot bravely, and to cope with all the tasks which the death of your beloved husband will now place before you.”<sup>167</sup>

The records of the Brandenburg penitentiary show that Franz Jägerstätter was the first to ascend the scaffold at 4 p.m. He was therefore spared the sound of the guillotine repeatedly falling and being hoisted up again. The executions were carried out at intervals of two minutes.

On the day of the execution, Father Albert Jochmann was able to spend a comparatively long time with Franz Jägerstätter. On the evening of the same day, he told the School Sisters of Vöcklabruck, who ran a hospital in Brandenburg, about Franz. In a chance encounter with Franziska Jägerstätter and the author in Berlin in 1988, Sister Gilberta Lainer recollected: “I can still clearly remember Father Jochmann coming out of the prison and telling us that he had asked him if he would like something to read, perhaps the Bible. Jägerstätter did not want to read anything, he was wholly with God – even the Bible would have distracted him.” The priest also told the nuns: “I can only congratulate you on this fellow-countryman of yours, who lived as a saint and died a hero. I am absolutely certain that this simple man is the only saint that I have ever met in my life.”<sup>168</sup>

The bodies of the victims were cremated at the municipal crematorium of Brandenburg and the urns were supposed to be buried anonymously in the city cemetery. In certain cases, however, the priests who ministered to the condemned during their last hours requested the cemetery staff to disclose the burial places. Nuns from the hospital in Brandenburg then marked these graves by planting flowers. In this way, it was possible to protect the urn-graves of both Franz Jägerstätter and Father Reinisch. Sister Gilberta, who tended Franz Jägerstätter’s grave, spoke about this, say-

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167 Albert Jochmann to Franziska Jägerstätter, dated 9<sup>th</sup> August 1943 (440)

168 Sister Kallista Vorhauer to Gordon Zahn, dated 14<sup>th</sup> July 1961 (462)



*Father Heinrich Kreuzberg in front of Franz Jägerstätter's grave at the cemetery in Brandenburg/Havel. In 1946, nuns brought the urns to Austria.*

ing also that the cemetery staff were very careful to ensure that the urns were filled and marked correctly. Everyone in the city of Brandenburg knew what went on at the penitentiary. The bodies were always transported across town by truck, past (among other places) the hospital. Once, due to a breakdown, one truck remained standing on the hill in front of the hospital all night.

Public outrage over the executions led to the erection of a memorial to the victims in the Catholic Parish Church of Brandenburg after the end of the war. Under a large inscription saying "But when the grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it brings forth fruit in abundance", is written: "From 1942 to 1945, these priests were executed at the Brandenburg penitentiary, as victims of unjust violence." Then follow the names of seventeen Catholic priests and, finally, the names of two laymen – the first being "Franz Jägerstätter". The last words on the memorial plaque are: "Their names also represent the 1,800 people executed in Brandenburg, the 4,000 priests of all nations, the 6 million Jews, and all the 11 million victims of Nazi violence."

On the first journey undertaken by the School Sisters back to their mother convent in Vöcklabruck after the end of the war, they brought Franz Jägerstätter's ashes back to the homeland; they were nuns of the very same religious order that Franziska Jägerstätter had wanted to join eleven years previously. On 9<sup>th</sup> August 1946, the urn was laid to rest in a grave next to the wall of the church in St. Radegund.