

Service in the German Armed Forces

A choice between the army and the party

Events around St. Radegund had made Franz Jägerstätter mistrustful of the Nazi Party long before the invasion of Austria. Statements issued by the Church, as well as a deep intuition or sense of being guided, which manifested itself in his dream, all served to strengthen his rejection of Nazism. Immediately after the opening of the border in March 1938, he drove to Bavaria with his godson Franz Huber and asked people in guest-house saloons about their political experiences.

Franz's stance on serving in the German Armed Forces developed slowly. On this issue, he had no help from anyone else. Six months of military service had the effect of making him feel he could no longer be part of it. As the letters exchanged by Franz and his wife show, he initially even chose military service rather than having to go to the village officials, whom he regarded as representatives of the Party, to ask for their support in gaining exemption. When his wife later requested such support from them, she was repeatedly told that it would all have been easier if they had applied before.

The pressure of army drill

The pressure designed to reduce a self-reliant, independent person to a cogwheel in the military machine exacted a great deal from Franz. During his training period, which began in October 1940 in Enns, he wrote a short poem in his notebook: "Each night I lay my head down on my pillow with a clear conscience, for our barrack-room senior, Private Cai, has taught me the lovely virtue of humility." Franz wanted to get basic training over with as quickly as possible and therefore did not follow the suggestion made by his mother, in a letter dated 19th October 1940, that he should break off his training by applying to have it deferred, so that he would later have to undergo a second period of basic training, thus delaying having to serve on the front line.



Franz Jägerstätter (third from the left) during his training as a military driver in Enns, in November 1940

Other reports also confirm that the training of recruits at this time pushed the young men to the very limit. In December 1940, in a barracks in Silesia, bullying drove three young men to commit suicide.⁵⁸

Franz was glad of anything which shortened the exercises, whether a driving course or long marches.

The total lack of information about the meaning and aim of military transactions annoyed Franz, particularly when he noticed that something had been planned a long time in advance. After his unit was moved from Enns to Obernberg am Inn, he wrote to his wife: “Here, they’ve already known for the past 3 weeks that the army was coming, yet we didn’t find out we were coming here till we reached the last railway station at Antiesenhofen ...”⁵⁹

58 Account by Josef Putz, Vol. 1922, Basic training in Ratibor

59 Franz to Franziska, dated 12th December 1940 (31)

Victimization fails to break Franz's spirit

The ideological and human atmosphere varied widely in the different units of the German army. At the time of his basic training at Enns, Franz wrote, concerning his fellow soldiers' interest in religion: "... many of our soldiers are starved of it; they would maybe still go to church, if not for this terrible fear of men."⁶⁰

After basic training, Franz's army responsibilities had changed, as he wrote to Franziska: "... yesterday, I had to take over a couple of horses and a cart – the topkick probably shoved the job onto me out of sheer affection – after all I'm a recruit again now, so I have to put up with the odd sweet remark, I can be quite proud of myself anyway, when I'm expected to be able to do in a couple of days what others who've already been at this job for four to five months can do, it's hard to keep silent! But these days will pass too – the main thing here on earth is that time passes, and as it does you can lay up many merits for eternity, particularly if you can bear everything with great patience."⁶¹

However, Jägerstätter did not take all his duties equally seriously. He was not the best shot in the sharp-shooting exercises, which he did not consider necessary. However, the care of his two horses was something he took seriously. The food they were getting must have been inadequate, so he asked his wife to send him a sack of oats for them⁶² (though this Franziska did not do).

Franz spent the last part of his period of military service traveling the route from the Innviertel region to the Waldviertel region with a convoy of horses. This undertaking was a real endurance test for both men and animals. Some of the horses were not equal to the strain and were sick by the time they reached their destination. On the first day they already had to travel forty kilometers, and in addition: "... we also had to perform an exercise during the march, presumably to stop us arriving at our destination too early." He described the second day as follows: "Today, we already had to have the horses yoked up by 5 a.m. – actually, it didn't

60 Franz to his mother, dated 9th December 1940 (29a)

61 Franz to Franziska, dated 11th February 1941 (42)

62 Cf. *ibid.*

bother me as I'd had to keep watch over the horses in a barn all night. At first we were told that we would halt in Steyr, which would have been enough for us anyway, as it was already a thirty kilometer journey to Steyr; but there was only a short stop for feeding the horses, and then we had to travel more than twenty kilometers more, all the way to St. Johann in Lower Austria. Except for the area around Steyr, it became very mountainous too, then we had to load up a good many oats in Steyr as well, so we couldn't unyoke the horses until about eleven at night; of course, we have to take care of the horses first, sleeping and eating are already becoming secondary matters." The fourth day also tested Franz's patience: "Today, we continued as usual in the early morning, all the way to Ulmerfeld. It wasn't particularly far – hardly thirty kilometers. The main problem is that we have to get up so early and then drive in the dark; and in Ulmerfeld we had to stand and wait for about four hours until we were allowed to unyoke the horses. Only bear everything with patience, with God's help and a good will you can achieve a lot." Lack of comradeship imposed an additional strain on Franz: "Today was a day of rest, but only for the horses – of course, it isn't necessary for us. It would be easier to bear everything if there was more comradeship. You'd certainly be very unfortunate if you always had to rely on other people: today, someone lodged a complaint about me to the group leader for something trifling. It's a good thing that hitting is so strictly punished here, or I might sometimes fail to keep command of myself. At times it really does seem as if you just can't get by with honesty and goodness any more, but somehow you always manage to get by; the devil uses every trick to make man fall."⁶³

From the moment Franz's immediate superior found out that Franz would like to go to mass, he assigned him to the guard the horses on Sunday mornings. Filled with joy, Franz told his wife whenever he managed to get to a church service on the way. "God must know how much strength I need to withstand the storms of these times," as he wrote, in connection with one of these visits to church.⁶⁴

63 Franz to Franziska, dated 21st–27th Feb. 1941 (45)

64 Franz to Franziska, dated 15th Feb. 1941 (43)

In letters from soldiers on the front, Franz Jägerstätter learned how little interest in church-going there was amongst the soldiers in the various units. Rudolf Mayer wrote that only three soldiers attended the Christmas service in 1941. His cousin and stepson, Franz Huber, reported that before his deployment in Stalingrad, of the three hundred men in his company only twenty-five attended the camp service;⁶⁵ after being wounded, he had a similar experience in the Austrian military hospital.

A soldier joins a religious order

One day before Jägerstätter's regiment was moved from Enns, he was ceremoniously vested as a novice of the Third Order of St. Francis, together with the soldier Rudolf Mayer. After the event, he told his wife: "... yesterday, on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, I was able to experience a Sunday of special grace: in the wonderful, festively-decorated Franciscan church, two soldiers were solemnly vested as novices of the Third Order. Dearest wife, one of these two soldiers was your own husband; I hope you aren't cross with him because of this, for – as I hope – you take the same view as I do. Also, it must be a great comfort for you to know that, as a soldier, my faith has become no weaker."⁶⁶

In the "Records of the Community of the Third Order in Enns", we find the entry under Franz Jägerstätter: "Year of birth 1907 in St. Radegund, vested on 8th December 1940, by P. Konrad", and under "Remarks", the words: "Membership transferred to St. Radegund". According to the note in his prayer book of the Third Order, Franz Jägerstätter took his vows at his home parish one year later. Later, his wife Franziska likewise became a member of this Franciscan lay community.

65 Franz Huber to Franz, dated 29th July 1942 (326)

66 Franz to Franziska, dated 9th Dec. 1940 (29)

