

Parting and imprisonment

During the two years between Franz's exemption (due to his "reserved civilian occupation" as a farmer) and his reconscription into the army, Franz and Franziska lived in the daily anxiety that the post woman might be bringing his conscription papers. In February 1943, as he was signing the postal receipt slip for those papers, he remarked: "Now I've signed my death sentence." The arguments within the family grew more fierce. In her fear, Franz's mother Rosalia Jägerstätter mobilized relatives and neighbors to remonstrate with her son. Franziska describes this period. "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 (the relatives came), I didn't do it any more." She explains why: "If you really love someone, and he has no one at all who understands him ..." In another conversation, she expresses her attitude at that time as follows: "If I hadn't stood by him, he wouldn't have had anyone at all." In an interview on national Austrian television, which was filmed and broadcast on 9th August 1983, she answered the question as to whether she had agreed with her husband's actions: "As far as I could." The children never forgot their parents' deep mutual understanding during this period. Once, when the eldest daughter was wondering whether she would ever marry, her mother warned her that many married couples fight, to which the child answered: "You and Daddy didn't fight."

Franz's mother Rosalia not only mobilized the kinfolk, but also spoke to the village mayor about her son's intention. He consulted with the local police constable, who offered to apply to the military authorities for permission for Franz Jägerstätter to do military service without weapons. It appears that Franz did not respond to this offer at that time.

After receiving his conscription papers on 23rd February 1943, Franz Jägerstätter wrote to his friend Father Josef Karobath: "I have to tell you that you may soon be losing one of your parishioners once again. Today I received my conscription orders and am already supposed to be in Enns on the 25th of this month. As no one can give me a dispensation for the danger to the salvation of my soul which joining this movement would

bring, I just can't alter my resolve, as you know ... It's always said that one shouldn't do what I am doing because of the risk to one's life, but I take the view that those others who are joining in the fighting aren't exactly out of life-threatening danger themselves. Among those fighting in Stalingrad, so I've heard, are also four or five people from St. Radegund ... My family won't forsake God and the Blessed Virgin Mary, for in my situation, I couldn't protect them any longer anyway, of course it will be hard for my loved ones. That parting will surely be a hard one."

The time that passed between Franz's conscription and his death

Franz Jägerstätter received his conscription papers for the German Armed Forces on 23rd February 1943: he was already supposed to be in Enns on 25th February. According to Franziska Jägerstätter, her husband set off by train from Tittmoning on Saturday, 27th February. On Sunday 28th at about 6.15 a.m., Franz Jägerstätter arrived in Enns; on Monday, 1st March at about 11.45 a.m. he went to the barracks. Early on the morning of the 2nd March, he was allowed to leave the barracks again. On the morning of the same day, he reported there again and stated his refusal to serve. On the same day, Franz was taken from Enns to the military remand prison in Linz. On 4th May, he was transferred from there to Berlin-Tegel. On 6th July, Franz Jägerstätter was sentenced to death by the Second Senate of the Reich Court-Martial in Berlin-Charlottenburg. The sentence was confirmed on 14th July. On 9th August 1943, Franz Jägerstätter was taken to Brandenburg/Havel and there, at about 4 p.m., he was beheaded.

Parting

The parting between Franz Jägerstätter and his wife was to be very, very hard. Franziska accompanied her husband to the railway station at Tittmoning. Her husband could not part from her, he could not let go of her hand. Both were torn apart by force as the train moved off. The train conductor was furious. The fear of being torn apart again, and of a repe-

tition of this moment, led Franziska to refrain from immediately visiting her husband at the prison in Linz.

In Enns, Franz spent Sunday morning at church services, and stayed with Father Krenn ⁹⁴ and his mother until Monday; he did not tell them of his intention.

On 1st March, before going to the barracks, Franz Jägerstätter wrote to his wife:.. “Dearest wife, I want to thank you again with all my heart for all the love and loyalty and sacrifice which you have given, for me and the whole family. And for all the sacrifices which you’ll still have to make for me. The hardest sacrifice will be that you can’t be angry with anyone ... At least you know to Whom you can entrust your pain, those who understand it and who can help you: Christ, too, prayed to His Heavenly Father on the Mount of Olives that God might let the cup of sorrow pass, but we should never forget when we pray for such things: Lord, not my will but Thy will be done. Help the poor for as long as you can. And you must take the place of their father for the children too now. Also, don’t be angry with my mother if she doesn’t understand us.”⁹⁵ This last sentence shows how strongly Franziska had supported her husband’s decision; Rosalia Jägerstätter would never forgive her daughter-in-law for not doing everything she could to change her son’s mind.

Franz could hardly find a bed on the first evening, and next morning left the barracks once more to attend mass. He gave an account of what happened next:

“In the morning, I then reported to the barracks again, and then soon afterwards the interrogation began. The company commander was not very critical at all – a second lieutenant colonel who was writing the minutes was somewhat more so. I imagined that the whole thing would be more hostile, but there was no question of being screamed at. Now I’m to be taken to Linz.”⁹⁶

In a letter from Linz dated 3rd March, Franz wrote that he would have to be there for a while “under investigation” and asked for items of every-

94 Father Franz Krenn, who was driven out of his parish at Geinberg and imprisoned for six months by the Nazis was only allowed to work as a church organist in Enns.

95 Franz to Franziska, dated 1st March 1943 (63)

96 Franz to Franziska, dated 2nd March 1943 (64)

day use, such as washing and toilet articles. He had evidently never reckoned on imprisonment or a trial.

Franz Jägerstätter managed to smuggle a letter, dated 5th March, past the censors, in which he gave a more detailed account of the first interrogations: “In Enns, too, they tried to ensnare me with every kind of trick, and to make a soldier out of me again despite all. It wasn’t so easy to stick to my resolve. It may continue to be difficult, but I trust in God that if it would be better to go a different way, He will still give me a clear directive. Of course, I was also asked what the pastor said about it; if I’d had to keep quiet about what he said, he’d hardly remain free for much longer.”⁹⁷ In the same letter, Franz related some encouraging facts: “I can also tell you that there’s a farmer’s wife in Enns who hasn’t yet allowed her children to attend the Hitler Youth, which is also a rare thing. So, you hear all sorts of things about people elsewhere who aren’t letting themselves be swept along by the crowd either ... There are already some SS men, as I’ve heard too, who’ve converted to Christianity before their deaths.”

In the reason given for the judgment of the Reich Court-Martial against Franz Jägerstätter, we find the following: “In February 1943, the accused again received a written order conscripting him into active military service in Drivers’ Reserve Detachment 17 at Enns, commencing on 25th February 1943. Initially, he did not obey the conscription order, because he rejects National Socialism (Nazism) and therefore does not wish to perform military service. At the urging of his relatives, and in response to the persuasion of his village pastor, he did subsequently report to his regular company, Drivers’ Reserve Detachment 17 at Enns, on 1st March 1943, but immediately declared that owing to his religious views, he refuses to perform armed military service. Under questioning by the Court-Martial Officer, he adhered to his refusal, despite being instructed and informed in detail of the consequences of his behavior in adopting this stance. He stated that he would be acting against his religious conscience were he to fight for the National Socialist (Nazi) State. He likewise adopted this stance of refusal under questioning by the Head of Investigation of the Court of Division No. 487 in Linz and by the Representative of the Military Attorneys of the Third Reich.”⁹⁸

97 Franz to Franziska, dated 5th March 1943 (66)

98 A facsimile of the court’s verdict can be found in the Appendix

Franziska Jägerstätter's first letter to her husband in prison, dated 7th March, betrays her sadness, for she could hardly expect ever to meet him again. Right up to the end, she had hoped he might act differently: "I still had a small hope left that you might perhaps still change your mind on the journey, because I feel such terrible pity for you, and I can't help you at all, I'll beseech the dear Mother of God that she'll bring you home to us again, if it's God's will." The children are constantly asking about their father. Franziska finds sustenance in her faith. She is worried about her husband: "How do you feel in your heart? Do you still feel consolation?"

Medical service offers a ray of hope

During the war, post was delivered in St. Radegund even on Sundays, after the church service. On Sunday 14th March, Franziska received a letter from her husband. "That was a lovely Sunday," she recalls. Franz writes: "I can also tell you that I'm declaring myself willing to serve as a paramedic, as actually one can do some good there, and exercise Christian brotherly love in a practical sense, and my conscience doesn't rebel against that. But of course I shall be punished for this."⁹⁹

The new idea of medical service probably came from the prison chaplain at Linz, Franz Baldinger, who later recalled Jägerstätter: "At the time, I made every effort to save this brave, idealistic young man. I tried to make it clear to him that, with all due respect for his personal idealistic principles, he should keep in mind the welfare of his family and himself. On my last visit, he seemed to have understood this and promised to act in accordance with the ideas I had put forward, and to take the oath. I was appalled when I later heard that he ... had been executed."¹⁰⁰

Franz Jägerstätter's willingness to perform medical service is also recorded in the verdict of the Court-Martial of the Third Reich: "However, he stated that he was willing to do service as a military paramedic, out of Christian brotherly love." Even though Franz again declared his willingness to do this at the main trial in Berlin, it did not alter the sentence of death for "undermining military morale".

99 Franz to Franziska, dated 11th March 1943, (67)

100 Baldinger to Zahn, dated 6th July 1961 (504)

Franz's fellow-prisoners

In his letters to his family, Franz Jägerstätter said very little about the conditions of his imprisonment in Linz, in the building of the former Ursuline convent, situated on the rural highway. "Otherwise, you've no need to worry about me – the catering and treatment here are good."¹⁰¹ On 4th April, he reassured them again: "... we can eat till we're full every day, and everything's well cooked, the cooks here are nuns, for in fact this is the Ursuline convent. Though as you can well imagine, one doesn't get fat on the food here ..."¹⁰²

Franz's fellow-prisoners from Lorraine, Lucien Weyland, Gregor Breit, Albert Boul and Emil Bour have given a detailed account of their period of imprisonment in Linz. These four German-speaking men from Lorraine regarded themselves as French; they were conscripted into the German Military Forces on 15th January 1943, and were supposed to take the oath of allegiance to Hitler on 23rd January 1943 in Braunau am Inn. During the address before the swearing-in ceremony, a high-ranking officer praised the role played by the men of Alsace and Lorraine and concluded: "Should any man who is to take the oath here today not be here of his own free will, let him step forward." Without having prearranged anything, these four men walked slowly forward. All those assembled were shocked and seemingly paralyzed. After a short period during which no one knew what to do next, they were arrested and transferred to Linz prison. The legal proceedings took some time: they were sentenced to death, but were then asked a second time. They then had to take the oath immediately, before the judge and, in a very short time, were sent to a parole unit stationed at the front.

In 1944, Weyland and Breit managed to desert; following the end of the war, they tried to get in touch with Franz Jägerstätter and have been in touch with Franz's widow Franziska ever since. Both men came from deeply religious Catholic farming families and shared common concerns with Franz. These men from Lorraine, who were only 18 years old, were sometimes in despair and as the eldest, Franz was able to comfort them;

101 Franz to Franziska, dated 11th March 1943 (67)

102 Franz to Franziska, dated 4th April 1943 (71)

Breit later wrote to Franziska: "I can only assure you that we found a good friend in Franz, who always had a word of comfort even at the most difficult times and who, during the scant morning and evening meals which we ate in our cells, would give us his last piece of bread, making do with only a little black coffee himself."¹⁰³ Weyland and Breit recall the terrible prison conditions: the only warm meal of the day, always a hotchpotch, had to be slurped down in just two to three minutes, while standing in the corridor. Each prisoner was faced only with the choice of either scalding himself with the hot soup or continuing to starve. On 19th May 1943, Franz Kehrer from Aigen in the Mühlviertel region of Upper Austria, was interned at the military remand prison in Linz; he too made friends with the men from Lorraine and later kept in touch with them. In his written comments on the TV film "The Jägerstätter Case", Kehrer summed up the conditions in the prison as follows:

- “3. In reality, the treatment of the prisoners was brutal and rough – not in the least like the description given in the television program. Whenever a prisoner was brought to a cell, this was likewise accompanied by yelling and whistle-blowing and shouts of: ‘Lie down and crawl under the beds!’ On Sundays or official holidays, the beds were thrown into disorder, just to give us something to do – i.e., recreation.
4. A single four-man cell was not occupied by two to three prisoners, as stated in your program: in fact, six to seven prisoners were crammed together in there.
5. The food was not served nicely – instead, anyone who did not get to the door quickly enough had his food poured on the floor. Even the chamber pot was used when there were no plates available, in order to somewhat assuage one’s bitter hunger.
6. Those who had already been sentenced to death, and those waiting for confirmation of their execution from the Division Command, had to walk around the prison wearing Dutch-style clogs in the early morning, as a deterrent for the other prisoners. Inside the cell itself, we were chained to the wall by heavy chains on our feet.
7. At ‘letting-out time’, a guard led us to the toilet on the chain while a second guard kept watch on us, holding a rifle with the safety catch

103 Breit to Franziska Jägerstätter, dated 16th March 1962 (483)

open and the bayonet mounted. Inside the prison itself, there was whistling and yelling and chains were rattled whenever a condemned man was being led to the execution chamber, in order to wear down the spirits of the other prisoners too.”¹⁰⁴

Breit and Weyland also described how terrible being chained was for the prisoners. Once one leg had become used to the heavy iron manacle, it was moved onto the other leg, which was rubbed raw by the chain again. Gregor Breit forged such a chain himself and, 50 years after the experience, brought it to the Jägerstätter farm. However, from the very beginning, the aspect that stands out most vividly in all the other prisoners' memories of Franz Jägerstätter is his deeply religious outlook. While trying to get in touch with Franz after the end of the war, Weyland wrote: “Mr. Jägerstätter, do you still remember us being in the cell together? I still have a lovely memento from you – a rosary you gave me. Do you still remember us three Frenchmen? We prayed many a rosary too ... hopefully it helped you too, for you never let a day go by without saying the rosary and your prayer from the book.¹⁰⁵ You never took the oath either, but you went away from Linz all of sudden, and I've never heard anything from you since then.”¹⁰⁶

104 Franz Kehrer to Axel Corti , dated 15th June 1971, copy in the possession of L. Weyland

105 Prayer book of the Third Order

106 Weyland to Franz, dated 28th Dec. 1947 (480)

Parted from home and hearth

Franziska Jägerstätter describes a feature of her husband's character in which he differed from most of the people around him, and this was his great love of nature. The beauty of flowers, for example, used to give him great pleasure. In the brutal, grey world of the prison, the sparse signs of spring were precious: "Nature doesn't notice all the misery which has covered humanity; even though I can't see much of it here, it seems to me as if everything is budding and blooming even more prettily than in past years. Hardly does dawn begin to break than you can already hear the blackbird singing loud in front of our window – the birds too, it seems, have more peace and joy than ever ..." ¹⁰⁷ Franz found the first signs of spring worth mentioning: "Yesterday, we already saw some apricot trees in flower in our garden here, they'd be something for our children, right enough ..." ¹⁰⁸

Franz's lively interest in his still small children was another thing which made him different from his fellow-farmers of that time. The children missed him enormously. Franziska wrote: "Your little ones are thinking of you almost all day long, when they have some pretty flowers, they always say 'We'll send these to Daddy, and he'll laugh, these would please him, if he had these.'" ¹⁰⁹ The youngest child, who was three years old, cried whenever her mother went to lock the door of the house in the evenings, because then her father couldn't get in; she also asked her mother to write that her father should come home soon, to "joke around" with her. ¹¹⁰ Franz was in some ways still able to take part in the life of the family from his cell in Linz: although the mail was censored, no limit was imposed on the number of letters.

107 Franz to Franziska, dated 2nd May 1943 (76)

108 Franz to Franziska, dated 25th March 1943 (70)

109 Franziska to Franz, dated 28th March 1943 (157)

110 Franziska to Franz, dated 21st March, and 4th April 1943 (155, 160)



Loisi, Rosi and Maria Jägerstätter, Easter 1943; this picture brought Franz Jägerstätter joy and "moist eyes" in the prison in Berlin.

In 1943, for the first time, Franziska Jägerstätter had to carry out both the tilling of the ground in spring and the harvest without any help from a man. Some heavy work, such as sowing oats by hand, training a young cow as a draft animal, and sharpening scythes, was not usually done by women. In addition, the dryness of the spring of 1943 also made it necessary to carry the water for the animals and household to the farm in a cow-drawn cart. Franz was kept informed by his wife on the progress of the work. He made suggestions about procuring new tools, such as scythes and reversible plough blades. Right up to the end, one of the prisoner's greatest worries was that his wife and his mother were overburdened with work.

Despite her extremely heavy workload, Franziska Jägerstätter sought strength in the same manner as her husband. During an exhausting week

of harvest, she also made a pilgrimage on foot to Altötting on the Feast of Corpus Christi: “We had already left home by twelve o’clock (midnight), and at six in the morning we reached the top, already pretty tired; coming home, we drove as far as Burghausen by car, I almost couldn’t get up to do the mowing the next day, but it simply had to be done.”¹¹¹

In the loneliness and monotony of the cell, Franz’s thoughts and feelings were very strongly with his loved ones. Besides the work on the farm, he thought a lot about the joys which the different seasons brought the children and, in particular, the cycle of events in the Christian year as well. His wife carried on serving as sacristan and was therefore particularly strongly connected to the Liturgy. In thought and spirit, Franz Jägerstätter wholeheartedly joined in celebrating Palm Sunday, Holy Week, Easter, the May devotions to the Virgin and Corpus Christi. Especially in the solitary cell in Berlin, liturgical practices and prayer times took on an important role for Franz: “As you may well imagine, I was very sorry to miss the lovely May devotions, but to make up for it, I held a May devotion every evening here in my cell; to decorate the picture of the Blessed Virgin, I had the little violets from Rosi that you sent me once, though of course it would have been nicer for a family man to be able to attend the prayer with his whole family.”¹¹²

Challenges to Franz’s faith

Because of the censorship, and out of consideration for his family, Franz Jägerstätter took pains to avoid mentioning any negative or disturbing facts in his letters. He took this so far that, in a letter he wrote from Berlin two days after the main trial, he mentioned nothing at all about the trial or the verdict.¹¹³ He wished to spare his family the pain until the confirmation of the death sentence brought absolute certainty. Nevertheless, we can still infer something about his state of mind through these letters.

111 Franziska to Franz, dated 27th June 1943 (176)

112 Franz to Franziska, dated 6th June 1943 (80)

113 Cf. Franz to Franziska, dated 8th July 1943 (81)

The first weeks in prison at the military remand prison in Linz, with all their indignities, were very difficult. Faced with the brutal treatment, Franz asked himself whether he really was the person for whom the guards took him: "So long as you can have a clear conscience that you're not a vicious criminal, you can live peacefully even in prison."¹¹⁴ The humiliations and cruelties provoked reactions in the defenseless prisoner. Franz Jägerstätter endeavored to keep these reactions under control by reflecting on the suffering Christ: "... could we still call ourselves Christians if, out of pride, we miserable folk couldn't even manage to forgive our fellow human beings?"¹¹⁵ Thanks to the same attitude, he overcame his anxiety in the face of an uncertain, still harder future: "Even if yet more difficult things should come, all shall some day work out for the best for him that abides in love."¹¹⁶ The fact that Franz Jägerstätter was put into the degrading situation of a prisoner was, finally, a consequence of his faith. Right at the outset, that faith was called into question. His former certainty seemed to desert him. At the beginning of April, he wrote that the only misfortune which could befall him would be the loss of his faith.¹¹⁷ In the following letter it becomes clear what sustained him in facing this challenge to his faith: he found his trust in God again in his memories of the happiness and the experiences of his marriage: "When I look back and consider all this happiness and the many gracious blessings which we have been granted during these seven years, which have sometimes even bordered on miracles, and if someone were to say to me, there is no God or God doesn't love us, and if I were to believe it – well, I just don't know how far gone I'd have to be to think that."¹¹⁸

During the time of reaching his decision, after his death and right up to the present day, Franz Jägerstätter has been repeatedly charged with the reproach that he should have acted differently, out of consideration for his wife and children. Parting from them was terribly difficult for him, but the love of his family radically eased his situation in prison. His wife's descriptions of his six-year-old daughter Rosi's prayers and offerings

114 Franz to Franziska, dated 12th March 1943 ((68)

115 Franz to Franziska, dated 25th March 1943 (70)

116 Ibid.

117 Franz to Franziska, dated 4th April 1943 (71)

118 Franz to Franziska, dated 9th April 1943 (72)

meant a great deal to her father: “I was also amazed that little Rosi can already make such big offerings, they certainly won’t be in vain. How could I ever feel forsaken here, when so many are praying for me at home?”¹¹⁹ The Evangelical pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was engaged to be married at the time of his imprisonment, had a similar experience: “What wealth one possesses in such oppressed times, in a large, close-knit family in which everyone trusts and stands by one another. I sometimes used to think that when pastors were imprisoned, those who were unmarried must find it the easiest to bear. In those days, I did not know how much the warmth which emanates from the love of a woman and a family means to one in the cold air of imprisonment, and that it’s precisely during such times of being parted that that sense of absolutely belonging together grows still stronger ...”¹²⁰

Hardly had Franz Jägerstätter withstood the struggle to retain his faith, than it becomes apparent that he was tempted to escape the tormenting uncertainty and the strain through suicide. In his writings, he thought through the issue and showed understanding for any person who commits such a deed – concluding however that, for a Christian, this is no way to escape affliction: “Even when the cross that God or that we ourselves lay on our shoulders may sometimes press on us a little, it will never be as hard and heavy as the one that Satan sometimes lays on his followers – for how many have already broken down under that burden and thrown away their lives? We should condemn only the deed of suicide, but never the suicide himself.”¹²¹ The Tyrolean Pallottine priest Franz Reinisch, who arrived at a similar decision to Franz’s out of conscience, and was likewise executed for “undermining military morale”, likewise bore witness to the temptation to escape prison through suicide. Like Franz, in the second month of his imprisonment, the priest encountered “the temptation” and “dangerous thoughts”: “Don’t allow this brutal treatment by the guards to continue indefinitely. After all, you don’t have to follow orders. You’re only here voluntarily, after all. Force a guard

119 Franz to Franziska, dated 12th March 1943 (68)

120 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand und Ergebung* (Resistance and Submission), Gütersloh 121983, p.41

121 Franz to Franziska, dated 18th April 1943 (74)

to shoot by feigning an attack. Then everything will be over.”¹²² The theologian Bonhoeffer, too, wrote from prison of the temptation to put an end to life itself: “Yet, from the very beginning, I said to myself that I would do neither men nor the devil that favor; they will have to do the business themselves, if they want to, and I hope to always be able to stand by my resolve.”¹²³

122 Franz Reinisch, *Märtyrer der Gewissenstreue. Tagebuch aus dem Wehrmachtsgefängnis Berlin-Tegel* (Martyr of Conscience. Diary from Berlin-Tegel Military Prison), Vallendar-Schönstatt 1978, I, p.65

123 Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand und Ergebung* (Resistance and Submission), p.70