

# The Huber – Jägerstätter family

## Childhood

On 20<sup>th</sup> May 1907, the unmarried farm maidservant Rosalia Huber gave birth to a son at her parents' home at No. 22 St. Radegund. The child was baptized Franciscus (Carraciola) in the parish church on 21<sup>st</sup> May. Franz Huber's father was Franz Bachmeier from Tarsdorf in the province of Salzburg, the unmarried son of a farmer. Being servants, he and the mother of the child were too poor to marry and start a family. After the birth, the young mother had to leave the child in the care of her own mother. This shoemaker's widow, Elisabeth Huber, had 13 children to feed on the produce of her small farm. Her grandchildren describe her as a deeply religious, loving woman of wide interests, who would often kneel and pray for long periods at night in the nearby chapel.

From 1913 to 1921, Franz attended the one-roomed primary school in St. Radegund. Here, one teacher taught seven grades in a single room – about 50 to 60 children in all.

In one poem, "From my Childhood", written in Austrian dialect and dated 7<sup>th</sup> September 1932, Franz recalls the discrimination he suffered at school due to his poverty: "As I was just a poor boy, this thought came to my mind, however well and honestly I learned, they always gave me a 'three'."<sup>1</sup> In the corresponding period, during which there was a severe shortage of food due to the war, the parish chronicle of St. Radegund mentions a teacher who used to supply his relatives in the town with food from the village. During the 1916/1917 school year, Franz spent two semesters at the house of his paternal grandparents in Tarsdorf, in the province of Salzburg, where he received markedly better school reports. The marriage of his mother on 19<sup>th</sup> February 1917 radically improved the boy's social situation. Rosalia Huber married Heinrich Jägerstätter, the owner of the Leherbauernhof farm at No. 7 St. Radegund. Heinrich Jäger-

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1 In Austria, a 'three' was the second-worst school grade on the scale of 1–4.

stätter adopted his wife's child and gave him his own name. On the farm, there was plenty to eat and to read. The young farmer's father subscribed to a newspaper, was a member of the St. Josef Book League and owned a small theological library which one might rather have expected to belong to a priest. His schoolfellows still remember Franz as an avid reader.

## **St. Radegund**

During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this small village on the River Salzach was famed far beyond its borders as a place where Passion Plays were performed. As late as the 90's, a Bavarian minister praised the quality of the performances here as being better than those presented in the famous Oberammergau in Germany. St. Radegund, a village of only 500 people, managed to organize a four-hour play on stage, accompanied by the music of a brass band and a children's choir, as well as the catering and transport for guests from the railway station of Tittmoning, 5 km away.

It was in connection with these plays that the village had its first encounters with Nazism. Father Wimmer wrote in the parish chronicle: "5<sup>th</sup> March 1933. The Nazi takeover of power in Germany. An unhappy time has thus begun for us. From this day forth, Austria and everything connected with her, including our play, have been boycotted by Germany. Our posters and letters to Germany have been intercepted and confiscated ... Ever since June 1<sup>st</sup> of this year, the German border to Austria has been completely closed. Officially, small border traffic is allowed, but in fact no German ever comes over here."

According to the results of the population census in 1934, the religious affiliation of the people of St. Radegund was uniformly Roman Catholic. Politically, St. Radegund was governed by the Christian Social Party (the results of the state election in 1931, the last free election before the Second World War, were: Christian Social Party 228 votes, Social Democrat Party 8 votes and no votes for the Nazi Party (NSDAP); however, in the neighboring village of Ostermiething, the Nazi Party already received 50 votes).



*Rosalia Huber, Franz's mother, and his adoptive father, the farmer Heinrich Jägerstätter, were married on 19<sup>th</sup> February 1917*

## Franz's youth

His contemporaries remember young Franz as fun-loving and popular. At the age of twenty, he left his home village temporarily. One reason was that he wanted to earn some money, and another factor which precipitated his decision was the rivalry between several lads over a girl in his village. He worked on a farm in the Bavarian town of Teising, from which he visited the place of pilgrimage Altötting on three consecutive Sundays. After this, he found work in the Styrian iron ore industry in Eisenerz, Austria. His commencement there in the autumn of 1927 came at a time of enormous national political tensions in Austria. For the first time, he found himself living in an environment that was hostile to the church. He temporarily gave up going to church, but in 1930 returned to his home village a stronger believer than ever. A letter written a few years later to his godson Johann Huber gives a clear insight into his experiences: "... You often read in the newspaper that youngsters of 15 or 16 have killed themselves; the motive for the deed that's usually given is disappointed love or lack of success in learning. But it would be nearer the truth to say that these youngsters have been uprooted in faith – for if disappointment in love were a major cause of killing oneself, few people would reach the age of thirty ... If you ever have religious doubts (and almost everyone will have them at one time or another) as to whether our faith is the true one or not, then just think of the miracles and of our Saints, which aren't found in any other faith except the Catholic faith. Ever since the death of Christ, there have been persecutions of Christians in almost every century, and there were always heroes and martyrs who sacrificed their lives, often in cruel martyrdom, for Christ and their faith. If we want to reach our goal, we too must become heroes of faith, for as long as we fear men more than God, we'll never get anywhere."<sup>2</sup>

Franz Jägerstätter recommended reading as a help in finding the right path as, he said, one cannot always rely on one's surroundings: "Why

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2 From the letter to his godson Franz Huber, written about 1935. In: Erna Putz, *Gefängnisbriefe und Aufzeichnungen* (Letters from Prison and Writings) Linz/Passau 1987, p.81

should a young person read only good books and writings? In the first place, because a person doesn't just need physical, but also spiritual food. We don't always have the chance to listen to good, fine sermons, for not every minister has the talent of being able to preach excellently well. And all this reading, as you hear many people say, doesn't it make a person more stupid than he already is? And that may frequently be the case, for there are many youngsters who often read a great deal, but mainly only romance novels and robbers' tales, which are often very exciting to read, but have no value for spiritual and religious education. If you happen to read a bad book, it can often do more damage than the benefit ten good books can bring. Therefore, young people should generally ask pastors or good teachers what they should read. Even though not everyone is equally keen on reading, it's always possible to read a bit during the long winter evenings – for a person who never reads will never be able to stand on his own two feet: he'll often become a mere football to be kicked around by other people's opinions.”<sup>3</sup>

A further quotation from the letter to his godson offers us an insight into young Jägerstätter's way of thinking: “We've already learned in school that each person has understanding and free will, and it particularly depends on our free will whether we want to be eternally happy or eternally unhappy.”<sup>4</sup>

As a young man, Franz had a wide variety of interests: he learned to play the zither, and also learned to write in shorthand. The other young people were very impressed by his motorbike, which was the first one in the village and which he had bought with his earnings from Erzberg. He was popular with the girls and he used to “chase after them” as some of his contemporaries put it. Sometimes the word “Raufer” (brawler) is also mentioned. Here, it is important to explain what this term meant in village life at that time. In every parish there would be two or more “Zechen” – fraternities of young, unmarried men, which were primarily concerned with organizing social events. One such group would always pay for each dance, i.e. for the music at the event. If “one of the other

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3 Ibid. p. 83 f

4 Ibid. p 81



*Franz Jägerstätter at the age of about 18*

crowd” joined the dance, there would usually be a jostle or punch-up. Franz, too, was involved in such incidents, though he was in no way a notorious ringleader. Because of one such fight, he was once even given a prison sentence of several days to serve, after his marriage. In this particular case, Franz had had a fight with a Home Guard soldier, which gave the incident a political aspect and led to the judicial penalty.

## **Franz’s daughter Hildegard**

On 1<sup>st</sup> August 1933, Theresia Auer, a farm maidservant in St. Radegund, gave birth to a girl. The father of the child, who was baptized Hildegard, was Franz Jägerstätter. It was no longer possible to ask Theresia Auer (later married name: Kirsch) about this event; however, her two sisters remember that Franz’s mother, Rosalia Jägerstätter, was very much against her son’s marrying the girl. Tensions existed between the Auer family and Franz Jägerstätter concerning the acknowledgement of paternity. In the village<sup>5</sup> and in the family<sup>6</sup> there was doubt about the child’s paternity. Theresia’s sisters remember that Franz paid much attention to the child, and, in particular, how attached the little girl was to him. The family was amazed at how deeply the ten-year-old later mourned the death of her father. Anna Auer (married name: Engelbrecht) once asked her sister Theresia how she felt about Franz Jägerstätter, and whether she was angry with him; Theresia said that he had begged her forgiveness, and that they had parted in peace.

Franz’s daughter Hildegard (married name: Stockinger), who lives in Bürmoos in the province of Salzburg, has very strong, vivid memories of her father. When she was three days old, the child was put in the care of her paternal grandmother in Bürmoos, where she received a loving upbringing. Her mother had to continue working as a maidservant, and as she had very little free time, and as Bürmoos was about 30 km away, she

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5 Cf. Gordon Zahn, *Er folgte seinem Gewissen. Das einsame Zeugnis des Franz Jägerstätter.* (In *Solitary Witness. The life and death of Franz Jägerstätter*) 3<sup>rd</sup> edition 1979 (1. 1967), p.40 ff.

6 According to the account given by his godson and cousin, Franz Huber

could very rarely visit her child. Mrs Stockinger remembers that as a child she knew her father almost better than her mother, because he often visited her. The fact that her father came on his motorbike already made it a great event, and also he always brought a gift with him: food and, above all, meat – which was so rare at that time, and which the little girl liked very much. After the war began, Franz Jägerstätter paid alimony entirely in the form of food; he once sent a note with one of these packages: “The nicest apples are for Hilda.” She remembers that, at the time, she staunchly defended these apples from everyone else. Hilda Auer was invited to her father’s farmhouse home for the annual village festival at St Radegund, the largest and grandest family festival in the region.



*Franz, after his return from Styria: he owned the first motorbike in the village. From left to right: Franz’s foster sister Aloisia Sommerauer, his mother Rosalia, his adoptive father Heinrich Jägerstätter, Franz and a visitor.*



Before his marriage to Franziska Schwaninger, Franz Jägerstätter went with her to the Auer family and offered to adopt the child. However, understandably, neither the mother nor the grandmother wanted to part from the child. Before refusing to fight for Hitler, Franz Jägerstätter visited Theresia, the mother of his child, told her of his intention and asked her what she thought of it; she advised him to do the same as everyone else and enlist in the army, for then there would still be a chance that he might return. After being condemned to death, he wrote a farewell letter to Hildegard. This letter has not been preserved, but Hildegard remembers that it said: "... be good, do what Mummy tells you ... the mother should give the child a Christian upbringing ... We will meet again in Heaven."

After the end of the war, the Jägerstätter family and Hildegard lost touch with one another; the reason for this was, apparently, a hurtful remark made by her grandmother, Rosalia.

In 1972, Hildegard Auer and her mother received a visit from Herr Erwin Fink of Heidelberg. A letter which he wrote after the visit shows something of the attitude of the two women towards Franz Jägerstätter – a few excerpts are quoted here: "... I feel extremely fortunate to have visited you and your mother, and to have heard your sincere opinion of your father from your own lips. ... Studies must be made of your father, Father Reinisch and Ernst Volkmann<sup>7</sup> in order to find out what gave them the courage, the strength and the spiritual insight to voluntarily and deliberately accept death by refusing to enter into military service for Hitler. I find your father the most interesting of the three: in particular, what you told me about his praying a great deal. You agreed with me that your birth, his heartfelt prayers and his heroic and lonely death are all closely connected. Therefore, when he said: 'the Bishop has not experienced the grace that has been granted to me', then that is his own personal experience to which he has borne witness through his death. You then said yourself: 'If there is a Heaven, then he must be there.' There is a Heaven, and he is there – he still loves you! What a joy it was for me to hear you say: 'The hours I spent with him are among the happiest memories of my life.' You agreed with me when I said that he is guiding us onwards. I have

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7 Catholics who refused to do military service on religious grounds

heard many clever speeches, read many books and thought a great deal about all these things myself, but if no one led the way and carried out such heroic deeds, everything would only be hollow words. Words instruct, examples inspire us to follow. That's what I meant by 'guiding us onwards'. Yet I believe still more deeply that, as the Church teaches, the souls in Heaven can help us. That is why I said to you: 'Pray to him!'"<sup>8</sup>

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8 Letter from Erwin Fink (in Heidelberg) to Hildegard Auer, dated 22<sup>nd</sup> Sept. 1972