

# 1941–1943

## A decision becomes clearer

### **An oath without meaning**

According to his wife's testimony, in April 1941 Franz Jägerstätter returned from military service with the firm resolve never to serve in the army again. He subsequently went into the reasons for this decision in his writings. However, he never mentioned the fact that, as a soldier of the German Armed Forces, he was under an oath of allegiance to Hitler. Since the spring of 1990, the records of the former Reich Court-Martial in the Military Historical Archive in Prague have been accessible to the public. Among them is the copy of the court-martial verdict against Franz Jägerstätter. In the reasons given for the judgment, we find the following statement concerning Franz's swearing-in ceremony,: "On 17<sup>th</sup> June 1940, he was conscripted to active military service in Braunau am Inn, sworn in to serve the Führer and Commander of the Armed Forces, but was after a few days again classified as being in a reserved occupation and demobilized."

### **Farmer and sacristan**

After returning from military service in April 1941, Franz Jägerstätter attended mass daily at his parish church. This was not at all usual for a man of his age and profession. Later, it would be said that he had neglected the work on the farm because of it. However, Franziska Jägerstätter, who, had this been true, would have been the main person affected, says that her husband always coped with his work very well. The good harvests on the farm also confirm this: he was, on the one hand, able to fulfill the official delivery quotas, while many letters of thanks also bear witness to the fact that he was able to help many people by giving them food, which was in such short supply at that time.

In the summer of 1941, the sacristan of the parish of St. Radegund died. Vicar Ferdinand Fürthauer, (who was standing in for Father Karobath,

who had at first returned and then been banned from the district), invited Franz Jägerstätter to accept the post. The reason for this was a practical one, as he attended church daily in any case. Father Karobath was also very happy about the decision, and told Franz that other parishioners had also said some very positive things about it: “The people of Radegund are very happy that you have been given this post. Some people have written to me saying that the church is now extremely clean. The financial rewards are, admittedly, very small.”<sup>67</sup> Karobath’s predecessor, Father Franz Krenn from Enns, responded similarly: “I am particularly glad that St. Radegund has found a deeply religious sacristan, and that that lovely little church has such a caring custodian. May God reward you for your idealism, so precious nowadays, and above all may He protect you from being conscripted.”<sup>68</sup> Father Karobath, too, drew a connection between conscription and Franz’s service as a sacristan: he feared that Jägerstätter’s commitment to the Church could speed up his being conscripted again.

Before entering on his new duties, Franz asked the daughter of his late predecessor, who had filled in as sacristan over the summer, whether she felt that she had been passed over and whether she consented to his accepting the post. As the sacristan, Franz’s concern was to maintain quiet and respectful behavior in church – anyone who gossiped was sent out.

## **In the exchange of letters with his Third Order brother, Franz’s decision begins to take shape**

In the years 1941 to 1942, Franz Jägerstätter and Rudolf Mayer, who had both been vested into the Third Order on the same day, kept up a lively exchange of letters on religious subjects. The main themes of their correspondence were their experiences in daily bearing witness to their faith, and in their personal religious development. A further shared interest was the reading and exchange of religious literature; they both concentrated mainly on the lives of the Saints (St. Francis, Brother Konrad, Klaus von

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67 Karobath to Franz, dated 8<sup>th</sup> Nov. 1941 (403)

68 Krenn to Franz, dated 7<sup>th</sup> Nov. 1941 (420)



*Franz Jägerstätter as sacristan in a funeral cortege; the right-hand pole of the banner is covering his face.*

Flüe, Theresia of Lisieux and, not least, Sir Thomas More). The two men were linked by an apostolic spirit. On 28<sup>th</sup> May 1941, Rudolf Mayer wrote to Franz: “Dear Brother, I know you will be zealous in winning souls for Jesus ... Our father Francis truly wore himself out in his zeal to serve his neighbors ... As his sons, we too should take every opportunity of ensuring that the faith does not perish in Europe ...”

At first, Mayer did not display any fundamental doubts concerning his deployment at the front. He judged it primarily according to the possibilities it offered for practicing religion. From this viewpoint, he described the four months during which he saw active service in Holland, Belgium and France as “a period of grace, when I again became conscious of the greatness of Jesus in the most Holy Sacrament.”<sup>69</sup> He did not mention anything about his activities as a soldier, but gave a detailed description of the unfolding of his religious life and the magnificent interiors of the churches in Belgium; after being transferred to Russia, he longed to return there.

Rudolf Mayer felt the pressure being brought to bear on religious believers: “A time will come when we will have to support one another if we do not want religion to perish: we live in a great, certainly very meritorious, time and sometimes it’s brought home to us that the Kingdom of Heaven requires force ...”

In a letter dated 1<sup>st</sup> June 1941, Rudolf Mayer sent his thanks for a package containing “food for body and soul”. He gave a detailed account of a conversation with a fellow-soldier about religion, in which the other soldier had told Rudolf that he should have become a priest. Mayer said he wanted to lead other soldiers to faith and thereby “go fishing (for men) with writings and books”. Franz must have responded with a remark about the lack of religious interest in his home village, for on 14<sup>th</sup> June 1941, Rudolf answered: “You’re quite right, people think they know everything already, that’s just the problem – it’s difficult to reach our comrades because they have an aversion to religion from the outset.” Rudolf, who was isolated “from priests and churches”, was extremely grateful for the New Testament which Franz sent him. In conversations with his fellow-soldiers, Mayer was often the only person to speak up for religious

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69 Rudolf Mayer to Franz, dated 29<sup>th</sup> May 1941 (202)



*Rudolf Mayer and Franz Jägerstätter first got to know one another at the barracks at Enns. They were vested into the Holy Order of St. Francis together. They both considered refusing military service*

faith; in such situations, he held to the words of the Bible: “He that confesses me before men, him will I confess before my Father.”<sup>70</sup>

In April 1942, this Third Order brother at last saw his efforts bear fruit. He wrote to Franz: “I want to tell you something about a man from Vienna, which even amazes me. A couple of months ago, he mentioned suicide and said that a few others would have to die first, he was really very torn, he really likes me and when, in the evenings or when we’re alone together, I tell him about Jesus, how He loved us and what He suffered to console the poorest of the poor, he suddenly starts to listen like a child. I tell him about the Saints, and he gets enthusiastic; it amazes me – I’ve given him the life of St. Francis and also Brother Klaus and a lot more, which he likes to read; he even asked me whether a pastor can receive people into the Third Order. I’ve been praying for many years for the salvation of souls ...” Rudolf Mayer found sustenance in reading the New Testament every day as, he said, the “spiritual battle” was often worse than the other kind. He judged his deployment at the front primarily according to whether it left him enough time to pray. During the first months in Russia, he complained that he was hardly ever alone and was therefore able to pray so little. However, he did manage to say the twelve Lord’s Prayers required by the Third Order. He very much missed the period when he was stationed in France, because of the opportunity of attending church there. Mayer evidently did not take into consideration the fact that, as a sentry, he might have a direct encounter with the enemy, for he wrote to Franz: “ ... I’m no longer in the kitchen, but am now on sentry duty; it’s a duty which allows you to be alone with God, certainly better than the distractions of kitchen duty.”<sup>71</sup> On 24<sup>th</sup> December 1941, Rudolf wrote a desperate letter. He did not mention a word about Christmas; it was a matter of sheer survival: “... at the moment I look terrible, I have enough food but it’s taking part in battle ... if I’m honest, I have to tell you, my body was already twitching on the ground, being shot full of holes over and over again, I’ve already prayed; Jesus help us, Maria ... bombs, cannon, machine guns – I’ve already been through it all.” He hoped that the horror would end soon: “Long live Christ the

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70 Rudolf Mayer to Franz, dated 1<sup>st</sup> Dec. 1941 (213)

71 Rudolf Mayer to Franz, dated 1<sup>st</sup> Dec. 1941 (213)

King, maybe I'll be permitted to see the end ... One day the great power will be no more, it's already decaying."

Rudolf showed interest in the wide variety of prophecies which, although such activities were strictly punished by the Nazi rulers, circulated even among the soldiers. He told Franz about visions of the Cross and about apparitions of the Blessed Virgin on the Dutch border. In the case of the apparition of Mary, it was said that, as well as being exhorted to pray for an end to the war, the children who witnessed it were entrusted with a secret which they had passed on to the Pope. In the same letter, dated 24<sup>th</sup> August 1941, Mayer wrote of a message given to a Sister Benigna: "... if you only knew how much I love the world, yet the world is rushing towards the abyss, but I desire to save it through a small band who are fighting at my side." The same letter contained a further miraculous sign: "I still remember the sign in the sky: a cross appeared in the sky, it was photographed, and the swastika underneath it became paler and paler until it disappeared." Rudolf Mayer expected the situation to be changed by an intervention from God: "I also think of Konnersreuth, there are certainly graces in great times, but when God loves someone, He chastises him. The (First) World War did not make people better – on the contrary, we're moving closer to the Antichrist. This time, the Antichrist will believe his time has come. He is mistaken, for his kingdom will not go on spreading forever. First must come Mercy, the promised King ..."

Franz, who hardly ever expressed thoughts of this kind in his writings, must have somewhat dampened his friend's optimism in his letter of reply, for one month later Mayer wrote: "You write that it isn't necessary for us to know the future. We don't know the future anyway, but some signs are given to us in difficult times – for example, the many apparitions of the Blessed Virgin ..."

Franz Jägerstätter must also have asked Father Karobath what he thought of the various accounts as, in his letter dated 28<sup>th</sup> August 1941, the pastor remarked: "The prophecies which currently abound are certainly not from God."

However, Rudolf Mayer continued to place his hope in such, and on 10<sup>th</sup> May 1942 he wrote to Franz: "I've received a letter: apparently in a private audience the Holy Father said that we should have patience and trust in God, the time of testing will not continue for much longer. God



will soon bring an end to this stormy hurricane, in some way that our human understanding cannot fathom. One comrade received a letter which said that at Lourdes the Holy Spring has dried up. The same thing happened three months before the end of the (First) World War.”

As well as the New Testament, Franz also sent pastoral letters from the Bishop to his friend at the front. Rudolf asked Franz to be careful when sending such things in future: “... without a sender’s address, and write in a disguised hand, so I can hear some news from home again.”<sup>72</sup> In the second half of 1941, two pastoral letters were issued which were significant for relations between the Church and the Nazi state. In summer, in a joint pastoral letter, the Bishops of Germany lodged a complaint concerning the interference of the State in “matters of faith”. On the 7<sup>th</sup> December 1941, The Bishop of Linz directed that a letter entitled “Message from the Austrian Episcopacy on the Issue of War and Bolshevism” should be read from every pulpit in the diocese. Its key statement was: “The pernicious nature of Bolshevism lies in the godlessness which it seeks to force on the whole of humanity.” In reference to writings expressing the Church’s view of this issue, the reality of an autocratic, religion-hating, totalitarian system was presented: the parallels with the situation under Nazi rule must have been obvious even to the least educated listener. The war against Russia was not supported by the Austrian bishops – in fact, the letter stated: “The monstrous evil of Communism springs from a source of *spiritual errors* and can therefore be combated finally and at the root *only by means of spiritual weapons*.”<sup>73</sup>

In December, Rudolf, who had always kept Franz’s letters up to that time, wrote that he had immediately burned the last two in the stove.

Rudolf Mayer’s letters in the spring of 1942 contain the first indications that Franz intended to put his life on the line: “I shall often reread your letter; it can’t easily get me in trouble if you give no sender’s address. Things certainly look bad for you; but may you live for a long time yet and do a great deal of good ...” In the summer of 1942, Rudolf ordered a book about Sir Thomas More for Franz Jägerstätter. On 12<sup>th</sup> May 1942, Mayer wrote to

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72 Rudolf Mayer to Franz, dated 21<sup>st</sup> Nov. 1941 (212)

73 Hectographic copy in the parish archive of Ostermiething: the emphases in italics are taken from in that text.



Franz, without adding a signature or sender's address: "Got your letter on the 11<sup>th</sup>. Thanks very much indeed. Of course, you're right. I once had the same desire you have, I don't know whether I had the necessary strength, I can't yet come to terms with accomplishing it, but perhaps this is the right way for you. Greater love has no man than he who lays down his life, and the most holy thing is perfect love, even Christ could do no more than to die for us. I have still achieved too little. I know that you stick strictly to what's right and that one shouldn't deliberately lie. You know, I try to avoid deliberately lying as well, but I could do it willfully to save a human life ... I admit you're also right when you say, isn't it better, once we've swum over the river quickly, to then be able to pray to God from Heaven that others should stay the course too, than to labor to help others here, when we ourselves don't know how much longer we can keep swimming ..."

When Rudolf Mayer came home on leave from the army in September 1942, the Mayers and Jägerstätters visited one another. According to Franziska's account, the two men considered going into hiding in order to avoid military service. However, they abandoned this idea because it would have endangered their families.

## **Further exchanges with soldiers at the front**

Franz Jägerstätter carried on a lively exchange of letters with relatives and friends at the front. It is possible to draw some conclusions about Franz's thoughts through examining their letters, although a few of Franz's letters have been preserved as well. On 30<sup>th</sup> November 1941, Franz reminded his cousin, the young recruit Hans Rambichler, not to give up praying and going to church: "You usually have to steal time to go to church in that organization: you'll find out later just how hard it will become. If it wasn't for the fear of men, then I believe there'd be a great many saints in this world! ... Be sure not to give up prayer, so as not to be overwhelmed by the weakness of the fear of men ... I believe that it's almost always been the case that, when hundreds of people moved to foreign lands, there were always only a few who still openly professed their faith in the new country too." This letter led to furious arguments in the cousin's regiment, as he related in his next letter.

Franz had already had many discussions with his cousin Hans Huber and with his cousin's mother, who were both members of the Jehovah's Witnesses, and in one letter he evidently exhorted his cousin to return to the Catholic Church. On 17<sup>th</sup> May 1942, Hans replied: "I believe that God will certainly not judge a person according to his membership of a religious community, but solely according to what he has done in his life – whether he tried to discover the laws of Almighty God and to act accordingly ... It is my conviction that it's of no use to a man just to be entered on some church register, but that only his deeds will be contemplated by the Lord." At the end of this letter, he says: "Now don't be cross with me for not conforming to your wish, and for acting solely in accordance with my conscience."

In St. Radegund, the Jehovah's Witnesses' rejection of military service was well known. According to Franziska, some people held it against Franz that his cousin Hans, whose religious beliefs should in fact have obliged him to reject military service, was nonetheless doing it.

The letters from Franz Huber to Franz, his cousin and godfather, reveal a warm, close relationship. In July 1942, Huber was on the military transport to Stalingrad and wrote: "... I've already taken a good look at Russia ... Here in Russia, you see no churches, though there are plenty of military cemeteries." Huber was one of the very few in his company to attend a camp service: "... No bullet can take me by surprise, for I'm happy because I've received Holy Communion right here in the enemy's country." Jägerstätter must have replied with an explosive letter, for on 16<sup>th</sup> August 1942 his cousin replied: "Dear Godfather, I read your letter 3 or 4 times until I grasped its meaning, and I must tell you that it certainly is exactly as you say. I already know from my own experience. In our group there's a man, about 30 years old, a real Nazi bandit. We often argue with each other, and I told him, 'One day, Austria's going to be just like it is here in Russia.' 'Your ideas are all wrong,' he said angrily, 'After the war, we'll show you exactly what we've planned. 'You won't manage it in the countryside,' I said. 'Oh yes,' he said, 'We'll manage it all right – if not with goodwill, then with fire and the sword. Right now, while the war's on, we can't do it, because we need the people.' It certainly makes the outlook for the future appear promising – I could write a great deal more, if I was allowed. And we're supposed to go into battle side by side with people like that! Now, in the next few days, we're going to be seeing some fighting."

Franz Jägerstätter was evidently pleased by his godson's attitude, for on 30. 8. 1942 he wrote: "Above all, many thanks for your two letters, which I was extremely glad to receive – I received the one dated 13<sup>th</sup> August the day before yesterday, and the one dated 16<sup>th</sup> August yesterday, and as you can imagine I felt much relieved when I read your letter yesterday, and of course my dear wife was still more fearful." The reason for Franziska Jägerstätter's "fearfulness" is not too difficult to understand; phrases like "Nazi bandit" or "and we're supposed to go into battle side by side with people like that" could, in fact, be very dangerous. The Upper Austrian Carmelite Father August Wörndl was condemned to death and executed in Brandenburg for writing similar "defeatist letters".<sup>74</sup>

Franz Huber was lucky. In September 1942, he received a minor shot wound outside Stalingrad and was sent back to a military hospital in Austria, thus escaping the fate of the many who died at Stalingrad. Like Rudolf Mayer, he gave realistic descriptions of his experience at the front: "... but maybe I'll manage to remain in Austria during the worst months of the winter, for I've had it up to here with the hellish gunfire. In only two days, our company had been annihilated – all dead and wounded. I can't thank God enough (for his own escape) ... It tore them away left and right, it was sickening to see."<sup>75</sup>

When asked what effect his godfather's admonitions and letters had on him at the front, Franz Huber recalls that they put him in a dilemma. On the one hand, influenced by Jägerstätter, he strongly rejected the system, but on the other hand he was a comrade among comrades who did not find it easy not to completely belong to the group.

The letters which Franz Jägerstätter received from neighbors and friends at the front reveal much about the mood there, even in the light of the victories of the initial period. In not one letter, on not one postcard, does one find any patriotic or "heroic" utterances, nor are any positive aspects of military service mentioned. Homesickness and hope that the war will end soon are the most frequently expressed emotions.

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74 Cf. *Widerstand und Verfolgung in Oberösterreich (Resistance and Persecution in Upper Austria) II*, p.68.

75 Franz Huber to Franz, dated 24<sup>th</sup> October 1942 (333)

The solidarity of the village community in St. Radegund and its relatively distant relations with the Nazi rulers were also of decisive significance in connection with Jägerstätter's letter-writing. The Gestapo's most trusted representative in the village was the midwife, a person whose profession put her in a position to hear a great deal. This woman composed a letter in which she gave the names of ten opponents of the system. This letter caught the attention of the girl whose job it was to take letters to the post office in Ostermiething, and she gave it to the then mayor of the village – who opened and burned the letter. The list of opponents included Franz Jägerstätter. Postal surveillance was one of the Gestapo's reactions to people whom they suspected. In the neighboring villages, Franz Jägerstätter would never even have got as far as stating his refusal to serve in the army: he would probably have already been charged with “undermining military morale” just based on his verbal and written comments.

## **Franz debates the issues in his writings**

It was not until he was in detention, awaiting trial in Linz, that Franz Jägerstätter would discover that there was resistance to the regime and its war in other places too. In St. Radegund, he had neither the support of a group nor discussions with others. From 1941 to 1943, he wrote down his thoughts concerning his political and religious responsibility in several notebooks and on loose pieces of paper. These writings must have helped him to clarify the individual issues, and were also intended to explain the reasons for his intended decision to his family. During this time, Franz Jägerstätter also compiled a catechism on questions of faith, as he feared that his children would receive no religious instruction. He gave this to the village pastor, Father Ferdinand Fürthauer; but the priest burned the text before leaving the parish in June 1945. On 29<sup>th</sup> August 1989, Fürthauer wrote to Franziska Jägerstätter about this text: “He once gave me an excerpt taken from the small religious instruction book and the catechism. Unfortunately, I burned this together with other things when I left St. Radegund. How glad I would be if it had only been preserved.”

In his thoughts on politics, Franz Jägerstätter closely examines the Nazi

ideology. His point of reference is the individual person, the individual Christ, amidst the tangled complexities of politics. He finds guidance in statements issued by church leaders before the invasion by Hitler,<sup>76</sup> in the Bible and in the lives of the Saints and Martyrs. Neither propaganda nor fear are able to influence the clarity of his thoughts. He regards the Nazi Party and the Church as two communities whose worldviews are in total contradiction; it is therefore impermissible for an individual to belong to them both. He does not grant individual Germans (and Austrians) the right to rejoice over the spoils of war, while at the same time pushing the responsibility onto other people. For Jägerstätter, prayers for peace are worthless if the person offering them up is still taking part in the injustices of Nazism and helping to fight for its victory.

In an essay entitled “A Righteous or an Unrighteous War?” written on 24<sup>th</sup> May 1942, Franz examines some fundamental questions: “Is it already a matter of indifference today, whether one wages a righteous or an unrighteous war? If I had not read so many Catholic books and journals, perhaps I too would think differently today. In the past, how was it possible to canonize so many Christians, who risked their lives so willingly – needless to say, because of their faith? – And most of them did not have to carry out such terrible orders as are now demanded of us. Could there be anything worse than having to murder and rob people who are only defending their homeland, just to help an antireligious power to triumph, so that it can found a pseudo-religious or rather, a godless worldwide Reich? Nowadays, everyone talks only about the wicked Russians – there probably won’t even be any question about the other countries to which the same thing is being done, or will perhaps be done.”<sup>77</sup>

The propaganda surrounding the alleged crusade against Bolshevism does not wash with Jägerstätter. Under the heading “Bolshevism – or Nazism?” he writes: “It really is very sad to constantly hear Christians saying that the war which Germany is now waging is, perhaps, not so unrighteous after all – as, through it, Bolshevism will be eradicated. It is true

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76 In connection with the war against Russia, Jägerstätter recalls the Bishop of Linz’s introduction to the Papal Encyclical “With Burning Concern”, in which the dangers of German Nazism are described as posing a greater threat than Bolshevism. Cf. Gefängnisbriefe und Aufzeichnungen (Letters from Prison and Notes), p.168

77 Gefängnisbriefe und Aufzeichnungen (Letters from Prison and Writings), p.160 f

that, at the moment, most of our soldiers are bogged down in the worst Bolshevist country, and that they want to disarm or render defenseless all those who live in that country and who put up a fight. And now, a brief question: what is really being fought in that country – Bolshevism, or the Russian people? When our Catholic missionaries went to live in a heathen land in order to make Christians of them, did they too go with machine guns and bombs in order to convert and improve them by those means? ... If we're fighting the Russian people, then we'll take things from that country which we ourselves can find good use for – but if we were simply fighting against Bolshevism, then these other things, such as ore, oil wells or fertile soil for growing grain would, after all, never be as important an issue as they are.”<sup>78</sup>

Franz Jägerstätter diagnoses the point on which his people could be misled, and slid into guilt and war, as their bedazzlement through delusions of grandeur, for otherwise they would have had to think about the consequences of Hitler's program: “Oh, we poor German people, bedazzled by delusions of grandeur, will we ever return to reason again? As the saying goes: ‘Nothing comes about by chance, everything comes from above.’ Then did this war, which we Germans are already waging against almost all the peoples of the world, break over us as suddenly as, perhaps, a terrible hailstorm, which one is forced to watch powerlessly, only praying that it will soon stop without causing too much damage? For, thanks to the radio, newspapers, rallies, etc., nearly all of us knew what program Hitler was planning to carry out, and that the shrugging off of the debts and the demonetization of the Reich mark would bring about the very consequences which have now occurred in plenty ...”<sup>79</sup>

Franz Jägerstätter brings his thoughts on the subject of “Bolshevism – or Nazism?” to a close as follows: “Other peoples do, at the very least, have a right to ask God to bring peace and to strike the weapons from the hands of us Germans. Isn't it a real mockery if we ask God for peace when we do not want Him at all, for otherwise we would have to finally lay down our weapons – unless perhaps the guilt we've already heaped on ourselves is still too small? At most, we can ask God to allow us to come to reason, so

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78 Gefängnisbriefe und Aufzeichnungen (Letters from Prison and Writings), p.137 f

79 Gefängnisbriefe und Aufzeichnungen (Letters from Prison and Writings), p.139

that we can at last realize that other human beings and peoples also have a right to live in this world. Otherwise, God must certainly thwart our plans by His might, or else we Catholics of Germany will force all the peoples of the earth to bow under the yoke of Nazism. Almost everyone wants to gloat over the stolen booty, yet we want to lay the blame for everything that has happened at the door of only one individual!”<sup>80</sup>

Under the heading “Can anything still be done?”, Franz Jägerstätter draws conclusions from his thoughts: “Today, one very frequently hears it said that nothing more can be done, because if anyone were to say anything it would only bring him prison and death; well, of course, all that has happened throughout the world can no longer be changed very much. I believe that to do that, one would already have had to begin a hundred or even more years ago. But I believe it’s never too late for us human beings to save ourselves, and to perhaps also win a few other souls for Christ, as long as we live in this world. It really need not come as a surprise that nowadays there are so many people who can no longer find their way in this huge mess. People on whom you believe you can rely, who are supposed to lead the way with a good example, are simply running with the crowd. No one offers any clarification, either spoken or written, or rather – it’s forbidden to offer any. And so this unthinking running with the crowd goes on, ever closer to eternity ... I do understand that today many words really would achieve nothing more than, at the most, imprisonment. Yet despite everything, it isn’t good if our spiritual leaders remain silent for years. Indeed, it’s said that words instruct, but examples inspire us to follow. Do we not want to see Christians who, in the midst of all the darkness, are still able to stand above it all in clarity, calmness and confidence, who, in the midst of all the lack of peace and joy, the egoism and hate, still stand there in the purest peace and cheerfulness, who aren’t like a swaying reed, blown this way and that by every light breeze, who don’t simply watch the things their comrades or friends are doing, but who ask themselves only ‘What does our faith teach about all that?’ or ‘Can my conscience bear all this peacefully, that I may never have to regret any of this?’”<sup>81</sup>

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80 Gefängnisbriefe und Aufzeichnungen (Letters from Prison and Writings), p.140

81 Gefängnisbriefe und Aufzeichnungen (Letters from Prison and Writings), 146 f



## Franz Jägerstätter seeks advice

Franz Jägerstätter's decision not to obey a fresh conscription into the army led to arguments within the family, particularly with his mother. He talked over his intention with his friends in the priesthood. But no one could remove his objection to active participation in the war. Father Karobath recalls: "We met in the Bavarian town of Tittmoning. I wanted to talk him out of it; but he defeated me again and again with the words of the Scriptures." Jägerstätter told Vicar Fürthauer of his intention during confession; the Vicar called him a potential suicide and refused to give him absolution. Franziska Jägerstätter felt her husband's sadness about the priest's words and was able to help Franz find his inner sense of balance again. Decades after the event, Fürthauer wrote to Franziska: "... I wanted to save his life, but he did not want any pretence and rejected all falsehood. I too often pray that Franz Jägerstätter may forgive me."<sup>82</sup>

As the words of Bishop Gföllner's pastoral letters had significantly influenced Franz Jägerstätter's evaluation of Nazism, he expected to receive some advice and a way out of the dilemma he was in from Gföllner's successor, Bishop Joseph Calasanz Fliesser. Among Franz Jägerstätter's writings, there is a separate sheet with eleven questions on it; this clearly suggests that Franz Jägerstätter prepared himself for his talk with the Bishop in this way.

"Who can and wants to answer me these ten questions?"

1. Who can give us a guarantee that it is not the slightest bit sinful to join a party whose ambition it is to eradicate Christianity?
2. When did church leaders reach the decision and give their sanction that we should now be permitted to do and obey anything which the Nazi Party or government orders or wishes us to do?
3. If it is now regarded as right and good to be a member of the German People's Community, and to assemble and sacrifice for it, then shouldn't each person who does not take part be declared bad or unrighteous – for, after all, both things can't be good?

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82 Ferdinand Fürthauer to Franziska Jägerstätter, dated 29<sup>th</sup> August 1989

4. What Catholic dares to declare that the predatory raids which Germany has already made, and is still carrying on in several countries, are a righteous and holy war?
5. Who dares to claim that only one of the German people bears the responsibility for this war – for why, then, did so many millions of Germans still have to vote “Yes” or “No”?
6. Since when can the deluded ones – those who die without any remorse or amendment in the sins and mistakes they have committed due to their delusion – since when can they, too, go to Heaven?
7. Why do we celebrate fighters for Nazism as heroes even in the churches of Austria? Didn't we still d... such people to hell only five years ago?
8. If the German soldiers who have lost their lives fighting for the victory of Nazism can be declared heroes and saints, then how much more blessed must the soldiers in the other countries be, who've been attacked by the Germans and who set out to defend their fatherland? Can we still regard this war as a punishment from God, or wouldn't it be better to pray that the war should go on till the end of all time, rather than praying for it to end soon, since it's bringing forth so many heroes and saints?
9. How is it possible to raise one's children to be true Catholics nowadays, when one is supposed to explain that what used to be very sinful is now good or, at least, not a sin?
10. Why should whatever the crowd is shouting and doing now be regarded as righteous and good? Can one reach the other shore safely if one constantly lets oneself be unresistingly swept along by the current?
11. Who can manage to be both a soldier of Christ and a soldier for Nazism, and to fight for the victory of Christ and His Church and, at the same time, for the victory of Nazism?”<sup>83</sup>

Franziska Jägerstätter accompanied her husband to Linz, though she did not take part in the talk with the Bishop, which by her reckoning lasted

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83 In the heading, Jägerstätter mentions ten questions, but then lists eleven questions in the text (Gefängnisbriefe, Letters from Prison, p.177f)

for about half an hour. She remembers the moment when her husband came out of the Bishop's consulting room: "He was very sad, and said to me: 'They don't dare themselves, or it'll be their turn next.' Franz's main impression was that the Bishop did not dare to speak openly, because he did not know him – after all, Franz could have been a spy." The Bishop's attitude is not surprising, as the sudden search of all the rectories in his diocese in 1940 had shown him how suspiciously the Gestapo kept an eye on relations between soldiers at the front and the clergy.

Bishop Fliesser talked about his meeting with Franz Jägerstätter in connection with the non-publication of an article about him in the Linz church newspaper; the editor, Franz Vieböck gives an account of Fliesser's words: "I saw that the man was thirsty for martyrdom and for suffering in atonement, and I told him he could only walk that path if he was sure that he was being called to do so by an extraordinary summons from above, not just from within himself. He affirmed this."<sup>84</sup> Franziska Jägerstätter finds the Bishop's choice of words inappropriate: if the most important thing for her husband had been to suffer in atonement, he would not have needed to go to the Bishop. Vieböck's letter reveals Fliesser's approach: "In vain, I explained to him the basic principles of morality concerning the degree of responsibility which a private person and citizen bears for the actions of those in authority, and reminded him of his far higher responsibility for those within his private circle, particularly his family." The Bishop judged in accordance with the prevailing moral outlook of that time.<sup>85</sup> However, he was unable to dispel Franz Jägerstätter's fundamental misgivings about participating in the Nazi war of conquest. For Franz Jägerstätter thinking, even when receiving orders, was indispensable: "We may just as well strike out the gifts of wisdom and understanding from the Seven Gifts for which we pray to the Holy Spirit. For if we're supposed to obey the Führer blindly anyway, why should we need wisdom and understanding? Shouldn't we Christians become true suc-

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84 Franz Vieböck to Leopold Arthofer, dated 27<sup>th</sup> February 1946

85 Cf. Waldemar Molinski, Franz Jägerstätter's Wehrdienstverweigerung im "Dritten Reich" (Franz Jägerstätter's conscientious objection in the "Third Reich"), Booklet accompanying the video *The Jägerstätter Case*. Berlin 1996, Published by Landesbildstelle Berlin, particularly p.35 ff.

86 Gefängnisbriefe (Letters from Prison), p.161



*Franziska Jägerstätter with her daughter Maria on her lap, and Rosalia Jägerstätter with her granddaughter of the same name*

## Responsibility towards authority

In his writings, Franz Jägerstätter repeatedly examines the issues of “obedience” and “responsibility”. For him, obedience also includes responsibility for one’s superior: “However, we should also not forget that we must obey the secular authorities; even if it’s sometimes difficult for us to offer loyal obedience to the worldly princes and superiors, as we often take the view that we are being unjustly treated, and that may often be so. But we shouldn’t be constantly complaining and grumbling because of it ... One honest word, spoken at the right moment, or a serious request, can often be of far more use to us than ranting or bellyaching for hours behind our superior’s back. And, again, it is Christ Himself who teaches us great obedience here, even towards the secular authorities. He was obedient until death, yes even until His death on the cross.”<sup>87</sup> In the same connection, Jägerstätter again examines the limits of obedience: “However, we must also ask God that He may grant, or help us to keep, enough good common sense to know when, whom and where we should obey. We should still, always and everywhere, be able to distinguish between the party and the state.”

For Jägerstätter, Germany’s military expeditions and the virtually religious avowal which Adolf Hitler demands, reach the limits of one’s duty to obey: “Yet Christ also demands that we should make a public avowal of our faith, just as the Führer Adolf Hitler demands a public avowal from his fellow countrymen. God’s Commandments do indeed teach us that we should obey the secular authorities, even if they aren’t Christian, but only as long as they don’t order us to do anything wrong. For we must obey God even more than men.”<sup>88</sup>

Franz Jägerstätter entitles one section of his writings: “On Irresponsibility!” “Nowadays, one very often hears people saying that it’s fine to go ahead and do such and such, other people bear the responsibility for it anyway, and so the responsibility is pushed higher, from one to the next, no one wants to be responsible for anything, and so therefore – according to human judgment – should only one person, or at most two, have to

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87 Gefängnisbriefe (Letters from Prison), p.92

88 Gefängnisbriefe (Letters from Prison), p.135

atone for all the crimes and atrocities that are being carried out in plenty at the present time? Is it an expression of Christian love for my neighbor if I carry out a deed which I think is wicked and very unjust, but do it nonetheless because otherwise I might suffer physically or financially? Someone else, we say, bears the responsibility for it anyway? It may well be true that some leading figures, whether religious or secular, do have to bear very great responsibility. But instead of making their responsibility lighter, we try to load them up with our own bundle as well, which we could easily carry ourselves, so that it will drag them very deep down one day! Do such leading figures really bear such great responsibility as we sometimes believe, or are we always so un-responsible (free of responsibility) as we are sometimes told, or as we ourselves perhaps imagine?”<sup>89</sup>

### **Franz’s resolve grows stronger**

The large numbers who had died in the war in Franz’s neighborhood made it clear that the life of a young man in the winter of 1942 to 1943 was not all that safe. In Franz’s view, if one has to risk one’s neck anyway, then it should at least be for something worthwhile: “I believe that the Lord is now making it not too difficult for us to risk our life for our faith anyway, for when one considers that in these difficult times of war, thousands of young men have already been asked to risk their lives for Nazism, and how many have already had to sacrifice their fresh young lives in this struggle, in order for others back in the homeland to be able to prolong their own lives for a while by means of the stolen loot, thereby murdering thousands more children’s souls? For with every new victory that Germany gains, the consciousness of guilt becomes greater for us Germans; so why should it be harder to risk one’s life for a King who does not merely impose obligations on us but who also gives us rights, whose final victory we know is assured, and whose Kingdom, which we win through our struggle, will abide forever?”<sup>90</sup>

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89 Gefängnisbriefe (Letters from Prison), p.144 f

90 Gefängnisbriefe (Letters from Prison) , p.134

Immediately after the war, Father Karobath described the period in Jägerstätter's life: when he reached his decision. "The situation is becoming critical for Hitler's Reich, and the danger of being conscripted is increasing ... He does penance, he fasts, he redoubles his prayers." Particularly important for Jägerstätter is the receiving of Holy Communion. Those who do not take advantage of this Sacrament offered by the Church, he compares to people who forfeit an inheritance because they find it too much trouble to regularly collect a fixed sum in person.<sup>91</sup>

However, receiving the Sacraments must also go hand in hand with one's personal Endeavour to achieve saintliness: "One sometimes also hears: 'D'you think I want to be a saint, or what?' However, it is very doubtful that such people could ever reach blessedness anyway. Sometimes it seems that such words are intended merely to mock the Saints in Heaven for their lovely virtues ... If we could ask our Saints what we must do to attain eternal bliss, I believe they could not tell us anything other than what the Catholic Church teaches us."<sup>92</sup>

Franz Jägerstätter is also at pains to include his everyday life on the farm in his spiritual strivings. Under the heading "How can I give all my daily tasks and all my work eternal value?" he writes. "... And now a small example: early in the morning, a farmer or farmer's wife start the day with a good attitude, saying, 'May everything be in honor of God' and then they go to work, and hard-working people like these have far to walk and much to do on one long summer's day; in the evening, when they're already very tired, the Lord puts them to the test to see how serious they were with their good attitude, and sends them a heavy storm, which causes great damage to field and meadow. If they have truly worked in honor of God, this shouldn't trouble them – on the contrary, they'll even thank the Lord for this misfortune. But if they've carried out their work for the sake of worldly profit, then they'll certainly lose their peace of mind. And I needn't say more, for we all know well enough what kind of thing blurts out of such mouths at times like those."<sup>93</sup>

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91 Cf. Gefängnisbriefe (Letters from Prison), p.108 f

92 Gefängnisbriefe (Letters from Prison), p.110 f

93 Gefängnisbriefe (Letters from Prison), p.105 f



But Franz Jägerstätter also felt great concern for his immediate neighbors. During the great social hardships of the 1930's, he had already given help to many in need. Mrs Holzner, for example, lost her husband due to an accident at work in 1935. There was no financial support of any kind available to her and the three small children, and it was impossible to keep the children fed only on the milk of her one cow. Many a time, she would find a large loaf of bread outside her door and sometimes 20 shillings, which was the equivalent of about half a month's wages; she noticed that Franz Jägerstätter was the secret giver. Right up to her death in 1989, she always asserted that she and her children would have starved without this help.

