

GERMAN OBLATE RESISTANCE

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OBLATE
HERITAGE

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by
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Preface

The present volume of “Oblate Heritage” deals with German Oblates in conflict with National Socialism (abbreviated as N.S.). By the term “German Oblates” we mean members of the Oblate Provinces of Germany and of Sudetenland (the German speaking territory of Czechoslovakia ceded to Nazi Germany by the treaty of Munich in 1938). Here we present cases of 42 individual German Oblates, and also describe the activity of the N.S. regime against the institutions of the two German OMI Provinces.

In order to help understand the situation of the period in question, it is necessary to outline briefly the tactics of the Nazis’ battle against the Church, as well as the attitude of the Catholic Church in Germany towards the totalitarian N.S. regime.

Until now, for whatever reasons, no attempt has been made to draw up a detailed and documented picture of this part of German Oblate history. Besides, as yet not all the historical documents can be traced and sufficiently examined. We limit ourselves here to the essentials. This study, then, should be understood as a fragmentary coverage of this period of history of the Congregation in Germany.

National Socialism and the Roman Catholic Church

Two institutions with an absolute claim on the human person

Both the ideology of the National Socialist Party, duly elected to power in Germany in 1933, and the belief of the Catholic Church, demand total adherence from their followers. The two were destined to come into conflict with each other. Only for a short time did Adolf Hitler, legally elected head of the German government, try to avoid open conflict with the Churches. In his inaugural address he called the Christian Churches “...the

indispensable foundation (basis) of ethical and moral life...” in Germany. In the presence of confidants, however, in his so-called “Table Talks”, he did not conceal his real ideas and intentions:

“A German Church, a German Christianity - that is humbug. Either you are a Christian or a German. You cannot be both ... No doubt, there is something great about the Catholic Church... it is certainly something to have survived two thousand years...But now it's time is over. The priests themselves are aware of this. They are clever enough to realise it and to avoid open conflict. If they don't, I certainly won't allow them to become martyrs. I'll make them look like ordinary criminals. I'll tear the honorable mask from their faces. And if this is not enough, I'll make them ridiculous and contemptible...”

Such was the unwritten program of Nazi policy against the Churches, and it was to become a reality also for the Oblates between 1933-1945. So, the attitude of Nazism towards Christianity was never “as well as”, but always “either ... or”. To most Catholics, however, this was hardly evident at the outset of the N.S. regime. Many were convinced that it was possible to side with the movement of national rebirth the Nazis pretended to be, and to be loyal Christians at the same time.

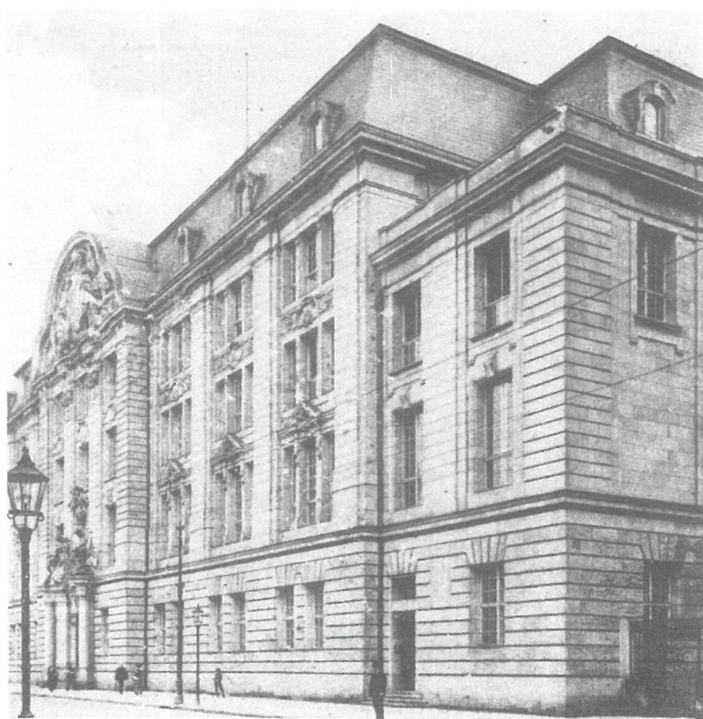
An attempt at coming to terms: The Concordat

In the light of the background of a widespread attitude of “as well as” among ordinary people, and the hopeless situation of the Church facing a legally installed government, both State and Church were interested in finding ways of coexisting. The Holy See accepted Hitler's proposal of a Concordat. This was concluded on July 20, 1933. The Church was to renounce any political influence, but at the same time was guaranteed freedom for its

pastoral activity, for the teaching of Catholic religion at public schools, for Catholic private schools and for its Catholic associations. Free diplomatic exchange was to be allowed between the bishops and the Vatican.

Reality of a Reign of Terror

None of these commitments as stipulated in the Concordat were honoured by the N.S. state. 1933 saw the beginning of a period of harassment and persecution of varying degrees. For more than twelve years the Nazis tried to subdue the Church as an Institution. Failing in this, severe measures were taken against individual representatives of the Church under pretence that in word and deed they had revealed themselves as enemies of the German people and state.



Headquarters of the Gestapo, Niederkirchnerstrasse 8, Berlin

Between 1934 and 1939 there was already a wave of persecution. It proceeded step by step, first against individual Catholic lay people too outspoken in their refusal of Nazism. They were sent to prisons and concentration camps or murdered. Catholic youth associations and other organisations were harassed and dissolved, or were forced to dissolve themselves. Finally massive attacks were started against the clergy by way of propaganda and legal action. A survey ordered by the German Bishops' Conference in 1984 showed that between 1933 and 1945 a total of 8,021 Catholic priests, 866 of whom religious, had been subject to no less than 22,703 acts of violence on the part of the regime. According to what records we have, 42 Oblates were involved in open conflict with Nazism.

Growing opposition: Pius XI's Encyclical against Nazism

On March 14, 1937, Pope Pius XI published his Encyclical "*Mit brennender Sorge*" on the situation of the Church in Nazi Germany denouncing publicly the numerous instances of breach of the Concordat by the Nazi government. Inside Germany it was impossible to circulate this document publicly in print, except in a few dioceses whose printing-offices were subsequently forced to close down. Hence the document was copied secretly, circulated in a clandestine manner, and was read from the pulpits of all Catholic churches without previous knowledge of the government. This caused immense indignation on the part of the Nazis who now lashed out with doubled ferocity against the Church, its institutions and representatives, aiming in particular at the religious, among whom were the Oblates of Mary Immaculate.

The German Oblate Province

In 1933, when the Nazis came into power, the German Oblate Province was flourishing. Founded in 1895, by 1933 there were 449 German members in vows, 48 novices, 20 postulants, and 568 juniorists in 5 juniorates. There were 20

Oblate houses in Germany, of which two, Langendorf and Aachen, had been founded only in 1932. In 1939, at the beginning of the war, the province consisted of 521 members, thus making it numerically one of the largest among Oblate provinces at that time.

The Oblate Province of Sudetenland

Political conditions after World War I necessitated the foundation of a Czechoslovakian Oblate province. Several foundations for pastoral purposes had already been undertaken by the German Province in this territory: Warnsdorf in Bohemia in 1911, Frischau in Moravia in 1912. These were the first houses of a German vice province, founded in 1924, which in 1927 became the autonomous Czechoslovakian Province. Subsequent foundations were made at Eger, at Teplei (juniorate), at the shrine of Our Lady of Gojau, which became later the novitiate of the province. After 1930 foundations were made at Altwasser in Bohemia, a shrine to St. Anne, and in Vienna, Austria. By 1933 this province had 8 houses and 64 members of German and Czech origin. After annexation of Sudetenland by Hitler's Germany on October 1st, 1938, the name of the Czechoslovakian province had to be changed to the Sudeten Province. On March 14th, 1939, Slovakia joined the German Reich. One day later Hitler annexed the remaining Czechoslovakian territory, now to be called the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. Thus there were now two Oblate provinces within German territory.

Mission of the German Oblates

The two provinces were involved in parish missions, retreats, apostolate of the press, education, vocation pastoral, parish work. Since its foundation the German province had accepted mission territories in Southwest Africa (Namibia), Kimberley, and Paraguay (Pilcomayo). Moreover, German Oblates were involved in the

foundation of St. Mary's Province in Canada and the Central Province in the U.S.A..

Adherents of National Socialism within the ranks of the Oblates?

This question must seem absurd to anyone who knows the horrible consequences of National Socialism for the civilized world and for millions of human beings. How could anybody, guided by christian principles, be an adherent of such a system? But things were not so evident at the beginning.

On the whole, the attitude of the German Oblates towards Nazism reflects that of the German Church in general. The period before 1933 is one of unconditional rejection of the fascist movement and its ideology. Catholics were forbidden to be members of the Nazi party on pain of excommunication. When the Concordat between the Holy See and the German Reich seemed to indicate the readiness of the Nazi Government to respect the rights of the Church, the German bishops revoked their former sanctions, maintaining, however, their rejection of, and their cautioning of Catholics against, those elements of Nazi ideology contrary to christian faith and morals.

There is no doubt that in the beginning among the more than 500 German Oblates there were sympathizers with at least some of the ideas and aims of Hitler's party, the National Socialist Workers' Party (NSDAP), mainly because of its anti-liberal, anti-communist and anti-bolshevist character. Faced with the chaotic political and social background of the times, many regarded it as the only political force capable of preventing anarchy and social upheaval, and of restoring law and order. As for the excessively radical, racist and anti-religious or neopagan elements of the Nazis' program and organisations, many hoped they would gradually lose their influence.

Such hopes were cautiously expressed in a publication by Father Jakob Drinck OMI, mission preacher, who

specialized in the social doctrine of the Church. In 1933 he published a series of conferences on the social encyclicals of Leo XIII and Pius XI under the title “*Freiheit, Arbeit und Brot*” (“*Freedom, Work and Bread*”). Though the book contained the usual objections against certain tendencies in Nazism, and clearly pointed out the items on which the Church could never compromise, the author received a friendly compliment in a Nazi book review and was reckoned among those who had understood the “*gigantic task*” the Führer was about to undertake for the national, moral and material rebirth of the German Nation. (J. Drinck had to leave the Congregation in 1943, but for other reasons).

The era of Hitler’s dictatorship was to become the beginning of the end for the Sudeten Province, dissolved in 1946. For the German Province, the Nazi era presented the most challenging period it had to face during its hundred years of existence. It was not only a challenge originating from the need of opposition against an external enemy; it was also a serious test for the internal cohesion of the province. Nothing, however, is known about any tensions in the province on this subject.

Religious: the “militant arm of the Catholic Church”

A great variety of thriving religious institutes were a vital element of German Catholicism. No wonder the Nazi state considered them a mighty stronghold against their totalitarian ideological endeavours. This, and the fate reserved for them, was expressed in 1938 by Martin Bormann, Chief of the Secret Police, in one of his directives to the Security Service (SD): “...*the religious institutes are the militant arm of the Catholic Church. Therefore we must push them out of their fields of activity, restrict and finally eliminate them...*”

At a very early stage of the Nazi regime surreptitious preparatory measures were taken against religious institutes, both male and female. On October 20th, 1934 a secret survey and evaluation of landed property and buildings

belonging to religious and missionary institutes were undertaken, as well as a clandestine investigation into their finances. On November 3rd, 1934, close surveillance of all pastoral and teaching activities of religious was decreed.

Katholiken!

Hitler greift nach einer Krone! Er will die Allmacht,
Sein Streben ist Vermessenheit, es widerstreitet irdi-
schem und göttlichem Recht.

Christus ist König!

Darum legt Zeugnis ab für Ihn! Gedankt derer, die
mit Ihrem Leben Zeugnis abgelegt haben, denkt an den
unbergehlischen Dr. Klausener, den Führer der katho-
lischen Aktion, denkt an Probst, denkt an unsere Märtyrer.
Bekennet Euch gegen menschliche Vermessenheit, die zur
Lächerung wird. Belastet nicht euer Gewissen, indem ihr
Zeugnis für Hitler ablegt. Gedankt der tiefen Besorg-
nisse des Heiligen Vaters und der mahnenden Worte
der hochwürdigen Herren Bischöfe.
Bekennet Euch gegen Hitler!

Anti-Nazi Poster by Catholic Action Group

Above all there were two campaigns aimed at discrediting the religious, and through them the Church as a whole, in the eyes of the people - the spectacular trials for alleged contraventions of foreign exchange laws, and for sex crimes.

Trials against Religious Congregations for contravention of foreign exchange laws

Such trials started in the summer of 1935. Religious Congregations were accused of violating German financial laws, and individual religious connected with such charges were severely fined and even imprisoned. Great publicity was given to these trials in order to humiliate Religious. The consequences of this campaign were particularly heavy for missionary institutes whose activity depended largely on the transfer of finances to foreign (i.e. mission) countries.

Any financial transfer to foreign mission territories like Southwest Africa, Canada and Pilcomayo was officially

forbidden. To support these missions, new ways had to be found with the help of the Oblate General Administration and the Procure in Paris. After 1935 it also became impossible to support the German juniorate of St. Charles at Valkenburg in Holland unless by secret and risky smuggling of money from the nearby Oblate house at Aachen on the German-Dutch border.

As for the Oblates, the province as a whole escaped being involved in any of the big show-trials which received widespread publicity through the media. There were, however, individual Oblates who had to answer charges of this kind:

**Fr. Georg
Fromm OMI
1888-1946**

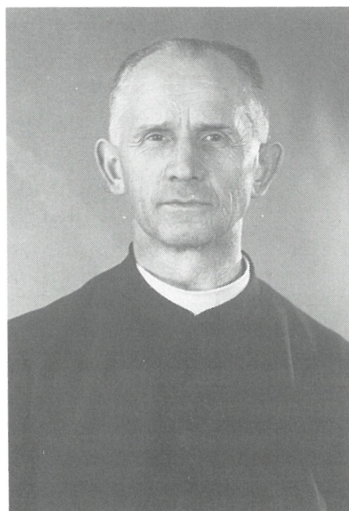
Case 1: Process for contravention of foreign exchange laws.

Father Georg Fromm was provincial of the Sudeten Province (1939-1946), when he was accused of unlawful money raising for the Oblate Congregation. Nothing was proved in the terms of the charges, so the proceedings were quashed. As superior of the German province (1933-1939), Fr. Fromm had to defend the rights of the Oblates against the Nazis.

**Fr.
Johannes
Russ OMI
1887-1958**

Case 2: 42 days on remand.

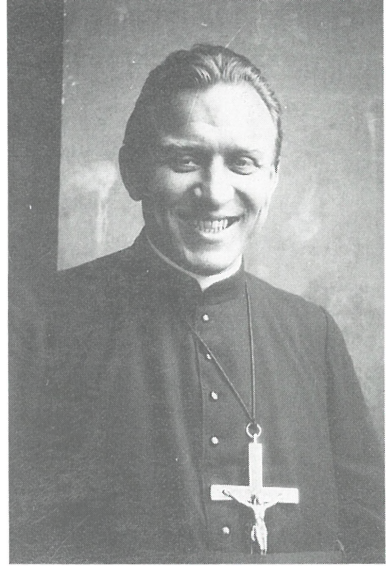
After accompanying a pilgrimage to Lourdes, Fr. Johannes Russ underwent enquiry by the customs because of alleged infraction of foreign exchange laws. On trial before the special court of Berlin-Moabit, he was held in detention for 42 days, after which he was acquitted.



Case 3: Obstruction of his Missionary Organization.

As the “Flying Priest”, Father Schulte was probably the best known Oblate of his time in Germany, well known even outside his country. In 1927 he had founded an Association dedicated to furnishing motorized vehicles of different kinds, including aeroplanes, to the missions (MIVA).

For a time, the Nazis tried to exploit his international renown for their own propaganda, and closed their eyes to the fact that he was a Catholic priest. They judged that his work might be of help in spreading the myth of German efficiency and technology throughout the world. Sometimes public ceremonies for the blessing of vehicles or planes for the missions took place in presence of local Nazi authorities. Even his missionary films were officially regarded as “*valuable means of popular education*”.



What the Nazis did not like was Fr. Schulte’s considerable impact on young people to whom he imparted the image of a modern and courageous Church. The Nazis claimed ideological influence on youth as their exclusive domain. Fr. Schulte met with growing obstruction. The financial laws forbidding transfer of funds to foreign countries made it more and more difficult and finally impossible for MIVA to support mission territories.

In 1936 Paul Schulte, at the request of the Holy See, went to North America to help motorize the Catholic missions in arctic Canada. At the outbreak of the war in 1939, he had to leave Canada and went to the USA where he was interned

when Hitler declared war on the USA in 1941. The Flying Priest was even suspected of spying for the Nazis, which must have been hard for a man who, even if not personally persecuted by the Nazis, had experienced the increasing restrictions imposed by them upon his organisation and his activity in favour of the missions.

Schulte was allowed to live under CIA surveillance in the Oblate St. Henry's College at Belleville. Here he had a hand in the foundation of a training school for mission pilots, "Wings of Mercy", and of the shrine of Our Lady of the Snows. Only in 1949 could Fr. Schulte return to Germany.

Trials for crimes of immorality.

In summer 1937 the Nazis launched a second wave of trials against the Catholic clergy and the religious, namely for alleged or real sex crimes, mostly homosexuality in religious communities. These trials were a direct reaction against the above mentioned encyclical "*Mit brennender Sorge*" of Pope Pius XI, and naturally were meant to discredit the clergy in the eyes of the faithful. Oblates were not involved in such trials.

This campaign was certainly one of the basest attempts at anticlerical propaganda. Nazi justice and the press presented individual cases of sexual deviation as typical of the clergy and celibates in general. These trials caused a lot of sensation, but on the whole did not have the desired effect on the Catholic population. The outbreak of the war in 1939 and the necessity of sparing the feelings of Catholics put an end to these trials.

Nazi action against Catholic schools, and an individual Oblate

In the German educational system prior to the establishment of the Nazi regime, Catholic and Protestant

schools were fully recognized, having equal right as the public schools. National Socialism, however, claimed a monopoly in the domain of education, and after 1935 began to carry through this principle. Therefore, education was the first field of activity where the German Oblates found themselves more and more restricted and finally excluded by Nazi policy. The German Oblates ran six juniorates: four on German territory, one in the annexed Sudetenland and one in the Netherlands.

- The first Oblate prey of Nazi school policy was St. Charles' at Valkenburg, Netherlands. By the law of 1938 all German schools in foreign countries had to close down. The Oblates had to dismiss their 80 juniorists studying at St. Charles'. The house as such remained Oblate property until it was seized by the S.S. in 1941.

- The biggest Oblate Juniorate in Germany was Mariengarden College at Burlo in Westphalia where all schools run by religious were suppressed by law in 1939. The last of the formerly 100 students left in March 1940. The house was confiscated for military purposes.

- St. Albert's College at Obermedlingen in Bavaria housed 58 students when it was suppressed in 1940.



Oblate College of St. Albert, Obermedlingen, Bavaria.

- The Oblate juniorate at Teplei in Sudetenland was suppressed in spring 1940. A number of the 60 juniorists had to be sent home, but others were allowed to join the still existing juniorate at Striegau.
- The College at Striegau in Silesia (now part of Poland), with nearly 100 students, survived only till the autumn of 1940. The house served in turns as an internment camp, a refugee camp and a national patent office. In order to destroy the patent documents it was burnt down by the S.S. before the Russian occupation.
- The College of Borcken in Westphalia, was not a school but a residence for up to 60 Oblate juniorists attending the public high school of the town. It was permitted to continue till 1943, when it was requisitioned for military purposes.

**Fr. Johannes
Russ OMI
1887-1958**

Case 4: Fined for a sermon.

Fr. Russ (already mentioned above in Case 2) was superior of the Oblate community at Kronach. During a parish mission in 1937 he severely condemned the educational system of the Nazis and their actions against Catholic schools. The court of Ravensburg fined him 200 marks. Even afterwards Fr. Russ had to answer repeatedly before the secret police for publicly criticizing the Nazis in his sermons.

Restrictions against the Catholic Press and Literature

From 1933 a law concerning editorial activity heavily restricted the freedom of the Catholic press as well as that of any non-governmental press. Later, Catholic newspapers and periodicals were to disappear.

For the Oblates, this meant that in 1939 their monthly missionary magazine “*Monatsblätter der Oblaten*” (today “*Der Weinberg*”) was outlawed. Their quarterly homiletic

periodical “*Gotteswort im Kirchenjahr*” (“*The Word of God in the Liturgical Year*”), only just started in 1940, was closed down in 1942 for being permeated with “*Jewish spiritual elements*”. Thus, the Oblates lost their two main publications.

Case 5: *Ban on publication.*

The writings of several Oblates, especially those in seminary teaching, were subject to censorship by the Reichsschrifttumskammer (national office supervising publications). Thus Fr. Ries’ eschatological essay “*Der Christ zwischen Zeit und Ewigkeit*” (“*The Christian between Time and Eternity*”) was banned in 1942. After the suppression and confiscation of the scholasticate in 1941, Fr. Ries, like all the other Oblate professors, had to confine his activity to pastoral work.

World War II 1939-1945

The outbreak of the war offered the Nazis a further pretext to intensify their restrictive policy against the Church and the work of the Oblates. Practically all forms of extraordinary pastoral work, like retreats and parish missions, were made impossible, as being incompatible with the general situation of emergency. To what extent this meant curtailment of Oblate work in Germany is clear from the statistics of 1938, the year before the war began. During that year the Oblates had preached 354 parish missions with a total of 8,525 sermons, and 382 retreat courses with a total of 6,249 conferences.

It became evident that the only possible pastoral activity left for the Oblates during the war was within the framework of parish work. Moreover, to be indispensable for parish work was also the only legal way for priests to avoid military service. The provincial administration tried to get employment in parish work for as many of the Oblates as possible who had lost their former work by force or circumstance. It was general practice among religious

superiors to offer as many of their priests as possible to the dioceses. Due to the fact, however, that there were more priests in Germany than parishes available, and that the bishops had to provide first for their diocesan priests, only a limited number of religious priests were able to escape military service in this way.

All the younger Oblate priests and brothers as well as the scholastics were subject to the law of conscription. This meant that from 1939 on 327 of the 521 German Oblates were called to military service. Only those who were over-age or sick remained in the province. Those who had managed to get into parish work were more or less separated from their communities. Thus the war caused a considerable weakening of the German Oblate communities both in their number and in their missionary impact.

Suppression of Religious Houses

During World War II, in 1941, the Nazi regime started their last destructive campaign against Catholic religious institutions. By the end of April 1941 more than 123 major houses of religious had been confiscated and their communities expelled. The Oblates, too, were victims of this campaign.

- St. Charles' College, the juniorate of the German Province at Valkenburg in the Netherlands, had already been closed



St. Charles College, Valkenburg, Holland.

in 1938. In February 1941 the vast house and grounds were confiscated by the S.S. without any explanation. The Oblates were given three hours to leave. They were reassigned to several smaller houses. Three of the brothers had to remain at St. Charles' to work for the S.S., and later on for the army.

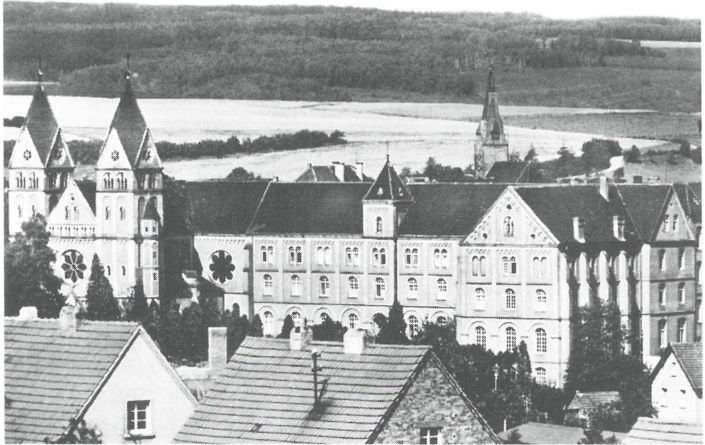
- Two weeks later, on February 26, 1941, the Nazi Secret Police (Gestapo) confiscated St. Boniface at Hünfeld. This was the heart of the German province - comprising the provincial administration, scholasticate, noviciate and formation house for the young brothers. It was the seat of the MAMI and of the Oblate Editions (the monthly magazine had already been forbidden in 1939). All in all, Hünfeld was an ideal target for the Nazis, in order to paralyse the Oblate province as a whole.

During the previous Nazi campaign against religious, there had been denigrating articles in local newspapers accusing the Oblates of various illegal activities. On February 7th, 1941 a first search of St. Boniface by the Gestapo took place. Two more were made on February 11th and 12th, when the bursar, Fr. Köthe, was arrested. The 80 Oblates of St. Boniface, with Fr. Robert Becker (1888-1974) as Provincial, received orders to evacuate the house on February 26, 1941, at 5 o'clock in the morning. They had to leave everything behind, and were only allowed a few personal belongings and 40 marks each. They also were banished from the county of Hessen-Nassau, to which Hünfeld belonged, which meant that they had to seek refuge in various Oblate houses in other regions.

It was Ash Wednesday 1941 when the Oblates left St. Boniface for the train station, after a last Eucharist in their church, and accompanied by the silent but very obvious sympathy of the population gathered in the streets bidding them farewell at this early hour.

Why were the Oblates expelled from Hünfeld and their house confiscated? They were accused of violating the wartime norms for the production and consumption of

agricultural products! This was the official reason usually given by the Nazis for the confiscation of religious houses with a farm attached, as was the case with Hünfeld. In this way the culprits were denounced as “*public enemies*” (*Volksschädlinge*).



St. Boniface, Hünfeld
Provincial Administration, Schoilasticate, Novitiate,
Formation House for Brothers - Centre of German Oblates.

The true reason for taking over Hünfeld was that the Nazi administration planned to transform the vast building into one of their Adolf Hitler Schools for the political and ideological indoctrination of young people. This plan, however, was frustrated by the course of events. More and more room had to be found to house people evacuated from bombed or endangered cities and areas. In turns St. Boniface at Hünfeld served as a shelter for schools evacuated from Bremen, a military hospital, a refugee camp, and, at the end of the war, as quarters for American occupation troops.

The Community Chapel of St. Boniface was used by the Nazis as a hall for political conferences and for Nazi “celebrations” with Hitler’s bust adorning the altar. The side chapels were transformed into toilets. The big and

valuable library of the Scholasticate was transported to Berlin where the Oblates had trouble tracing it. They were able to retrieve it after the war with the help of the American Army.

For some individual Oblates, the confiscation of St. Boniface had particularly heavy consequences.

**Fr. Paul
Köthe OMI
1893-1967**

Case 6: Three years penitentiary for alleged violation of economic laws.

Father Köthe was arrested in his capacity as bursar, and therefore mainly responsible for the alleged violation of the norms regarding farming products, which led to the expulsion of the Oblates from Hünfeld. After one year on remand he was sentenced to five years in a penitentiary, of which he served two years at Kassel. Suffering from complications of a World War I wound, he was released ahead of time.

**Fr. Stephan
Dillmann
OMI
1881-1950**

Case 7: Fined 1,000 marks.

Fr. Dillmann was superior of Hünfeld Scholasticate at the time of the expulsion of the Oblates. He found refuge at the house of Engelpport, noviciate of the German province. He established regular correspondence with all the Oblates in military service and with the dispersed members of the Hünfeld community. When the Secret Police discovered this, his typewriter and copying equipment were confiscated, and he had to pay 1,000 marks “security”, as it was termed. The Oblates in military service thus had to remain ignorant of what had happened to Hünfeld and in the province in general.

Two examples show that there were also psychological consequences for some Oblates as a result of the expulsion from Hünfeld .

- **Fr. Heinrich Fromm OMI (1888-1941)** had been chief editor of the Oblate monthly magazine. The suppression of

this publication in October 1939 was for him the beginning of a severe mental crisis. His depression was aggravated even more by the expulsion of the Oblates from Hünfeld. After two months at our house at Offenbach, where he had found refuge, he became more and more withdrawn, and he died at the age of 52.

- **Fr. Matthias Mathar OMI (1883-1962)** had been provincial bursar at Hünfeld since 1920. As early as 1935 it became evident the Secret Police had an eye on the Oblate provincial administration. The confiscation of St. Boniface was preceded by several investigations concerning finances and taxes. After one of these investigations Fr. Mathar had a complete nervous breakdown. He became timid and jittery, fearing more police actions at any moment. In July 1935 he had to be relieved of his office. He never completely recovered from his nervous collapse.

Besides Hünfeld, two more Oblate houses became a prey to the Nazi "*assault on the monasteries*"

- The town of Saarbrücken, at the French border, had to be evacuated at the beginning of World War II. The Nazi administration availed itself of the opportunity to confiscate the Oblate house for military and administrative purposes.

- In July 1941 the Oblates at Aachen were given four hours by the Secret Police to leave their house. The trumped up reason was the necessity of finding shelter for homeless people as a result of increasing air raids in the area.

Nazi Action Against Individual Oblates

Perhaps the worst chapter of Nazi violence against the Church were actions against individual representatives of the Church. A considerable number of Oblates were among the countless persons who suffered from such persecution. The following cases show how they suffered from unjust treatment, were deprived of their rights and lived in fear during the Nazi dictatorship.

There were, however, different degrees of persecution, from simple intimidation to the dreaded interrogations, often under torture, by the Secret Police. We describe the following cases according to their degree of severity.

Fear

A first step of the Nazi Secret Police against opponents was that of placing the person into a situation of fear.

Fr. Laurenz
Bünger OMI
1908-1984

Case 8: Vexation by the Secret Police.

Fr. Bünger was a member of the Sudeten Province and pastor at Kosel. Because he denounced the abduction, expulsion and ill-treatment of people by the Nazis, the Secret Police threatened and molested him. No definite action was taken against him, but he was kept in constant insecurity.

Fr. Karl Hey
OMI
1907-1993

Case 9: Interrogations by the Secret Police.

Fr. Hey was denounced for critical remarks on Nazi politics and ideology when preaching in church. The Nazi party and the Secret Police had his sermons monitored. Twice he was summoned for interrogation by the Secret Police: on March 13th, 1943 at Znaim and in October 1944 at Linz.

Fr. Heinrich
Beck OMI
1900-1959

Case 10: Flight into Czechoslovakia.

Fr. Beck was assistant priest at the Oblate parish at Offenbach. At school, he once lost his temper with an abusive member of the Nazi youth organisation and boxed his ears. What under normal circumstances at the time would have passed as a customary way of punishment became a political affair. The fact was considered as an insult to a Nazi institution, and Fr. Beck was denounced. Forewarned by a friendly officer that he would be called

before the courts he avoided prosecution by escaping into the Czech Oblate Province (later Sudeten Province). This was as early as 1933, i.e. at the very beginning of the Nazi regime.

**Fr. Karl
Lauth OMI
1901-1985**

Case 11: Flight to Paraguay.

Among the Oblates who always spoke his mind, was Fr. Karl Lauth. The human qualities of this young man were so impressive that he was appointed superior of the Juniorate at Burlo. He did not hesitate to express his opinion about Nazism in his sermons calling it a form of “neopaganism”. Like Fr. Beck, he was informed by friends in 1939 that he was in danger of being arrested. When the Secret Police appeared at the Oblate house at Burlo, Fr. Lauth had already left the country by crossing the nearby frontier into the Netherlands from where he managed to escape to the Spanish Province. Here he received his obedience for the German Oblate Mission of Pilcomayo/Paraguay where he served as a missionary till his return to Germany in 1976.

Warnings and Threats

Warnings and threats were common means of intimidating suspected persons. They were called by the Secret Police or summoned by juridical authorities. In many cases this was sufficient to reduce these people to silence.

**Fr. Johannes
Schulte-
Kückelmann
OMI
1909-1972**

Case 12: Warning by the police.

Since 1933 Fr. Schulte-Kückelmann had been a member of the Oblate mission band at Allerheiligenberg, Lahnstein. (He later became Provincial of the German Province, 1967 to 1972). At the age of 25 he was denounced for critical remarks against the regime, was summoned by the police, and received a warning. In 1940 he was drafted and served as infirmarian in the German army.

**Fr. Gregor
Peter
OMI
1908-1994**

Case 13: Interrogation by Secret Police.

He was reported to the Secret Police and interrogated because of the anti-Nazi attitude which he manifested in his work as youth chaplain and in his sermons. There are no details on record.

**Fr. Erich
Schmitz
OMI
1914-1974**

Case 14: Fined 800 marks.

Fr. Schmitz belonged to the community of Warnsdorf, Sudeten Province. Twice he was interrogated by the Secret Police and then fined 800 marks. The details are unknown, but the involvement of the Secret Police shows that there must have been a political background.

**Fr. Josef
Schulte
OMI
1909-1991**

Case 15: Threat of confinement in concentration camp.

Fr. Josef Schulte, (later Assistant General, 1966 to 1972) was assistant priest at St. Maximilian parish in Munich at the beginning of the war. As early as 1937, before even the anti-Jewish campaign of the Nazis had reached it's climax, the Secret Police admonished him for his friendly relation with a Rabbi. Far-reaching discrimination of Jewish citizens was part of German legislation from 1935 (The Nuremberg Laws). Already in 1942, the supervisor of Munich's school board threatened that he would see to it that Fr. Schulte were sent to a concentration camp for his critical attitude towards Nazism and related remarks. Even as late as 1945 the leader of Munich's section of the Nazi party advocated Fr. Schulte's confinement. The end of the war put an end to such scheming.

**Fr. Josef
Windrich
OMI
1881-1975**

Case 16: Threat of confinement in a concentration camp.

Fr. Windrich was pastor of the Oblate parish at the shrine of Gojau, Sudeten-Province. He had to undergo several interrogations by the Secret Police and was threatened with confinement in a concentration camp. He was forced to

leave his parish, pilgrimages to the shrine of Gojau were forbidden, and the parish facilities confiscated.

Professional Discrimination

A second category of Nazi measures against political enemies was to limit them in the exercise of their profession. For priests this meant prohibition to preach, to exercise their functions, to teach, etc.

**Fr. Clemens
Stroick
OMI
1912-1992**

Case 17: Ban on public functions in Germany.

Fr. Stroick was a member of the Oblate preaching band at St. Nikolaus near Neuss. In 1938, after a sermon preached at Contzen near Aachen, he was arrested by the Secret Police. After seven days in custody on remand he was forbidden to preach or speak publicly within Germany. In 1939, in addition, he was forbidden to teach and to publish. Thus condemned to inactivity, Fr. Stroick took up further theological studies at the universities, first of Breslau and then of Bonn, where he obtained his doctorate in theology. In 1949 he followed a call to St. Paul's University at Ottawa where he taught until his return to Germany in 1989.

**Fr. Josef
Dagge
OMI
1887-1949**

Case 18: Ban on preaching.

Fr. Dagge, like Fr. Stroick a member of the mission band of St. Nikolaus, was accused of having made subversive remarks during a parish mission. He was forbidden to preach within the governmental district of Aachen.

**Fr. Theodor
Schäfer
OMI
1900-1976**

Case 19: Ban on teaching.

Fr. Schäfer was parish priest and superior at Obermedlingen. In 1942, considered "*politically unreliable*", the school board of Augsburg forbade him to teach in schools. In 1943 he had to undergo several

interrogations by the police for illegal celebration on the days of Ascension and Corpus Christi. These two feasts, formerly public holidays, had been suppressed during the war by order of Nazi government regulation. Any public ceremonies, like religious processions, had to be held on the following Sunday. Contravention could be severely fined.

Fr. Romanus
Misch
OMI
1911-1986

Case 20: Fined 2000 marks.

Fr. Misch, member of the Sudeten Province, was fined for disregarding the above mentioned regulations concerning religious feasts.

Fr. Richard
Wagner
OMI
1905-1975

Case 21: Ban on any exercise of public functions.

On April 20th, 1942 Fr. Wagner, superior and missionary at Altwasser, Sudeten Province, was informed that he was no longer allowed to preach or to speak in public, or to exercise any public activity. The exact reason cannot be ascertained now, but most probably it was because of his mission preaching.

Fr. Albert
von Thenen
OMI
1906-1985

Case 22: Ban on teaching.

Fr. von Thenen, also a member of the Sudeten Province, was rector of the Oblate Church at Warnsdorf, and as such responsible for religion classes. The authorities forbade him to teach. We know nothing about the circumstances of this government action in his regard. The same goes for the following four cases of Oblates of the Sudeten Province.

Fr. Johann
Kässmann
OMI
1912-1991

Case 23: Ban on teaching.

Fr. Kässmann was pastor at Aussig-Seesitz.

Fr. Siegfried
Budniok
OMI
1904-1990

Case 24: Ban on teaching.

Fr. Budniok was assistant priest at Aussig, the parish in which Fr. Kässman, the pastor, was also banned from teaching.

Fr. Alfred
Skala
1914-?, ex-
OMI

Case 25: Ban on teaching.

Fr. Skala was assistant priest at Frischau-Schönwald, when the authorities forbade him to teach in 1940.

Fr. Franz
Pietsch
OMI
1904-1976

Case 26: Ban on teaching.

Fr. Pietsch was administrator of the parish at Warnsdorf-Kosel.

Expulsion, and refusal of residence permit

Expulsion from a governmental district or a province was among the most repressive measures of the Nazis against opponents. It meant uprooting a person completely from his or her sphere of life and activity. Individuals were the ones usually suffering because of this, but sometimes it was imposed on a whole community. The expulsion of the Oblates from Hünfeld on February 27, 1941, already described, was a case in point. All the members of the community were forbidden to take up residence or to stay within the province of Hessen-Nassau. The Oblates also had two individual cases.

Fr. Leonhard
Dietmayer
1914-1975,
ex OMI

Case 27: Expelled from Bavaria.

During the war, young Fr. Dietmayer was assistant priest at Gundelfingen. In connection with the expulsion of the Oblates from Hünfeld, and probably because of previous critical comments on Nazism, he was expelled from Bavaria.

Case 28: *Expelled from Sudeten Province.*

In 1941 Fr. Robert Schäfer was sentenced to eleven months in prison. In a sermon he had openly denounced the terrorist methods of the Nazis. Having served his sentence he was declared “*unworthy to do military service*”. Sarcastic comments on the suppression of a religious feast brought him again into conflict with the Nazi authorities. He was fined 1000 marks and expelled from the Sudeten Province.

Trials and Imprisonment

The Nazis found the legal basis for such proceedings as described in the two preceding cases in the so called “*pulpit paragraph*” and in the “*law against treachery*”. These enabled the authorities to proceed against anyone who criticized or slandered the regime. From the beginning, the Nazis had built up a wide network of informants dedicated to procuring information about subversive elements and “*enemies of the State*”.

The “*Pulpit Paragraph*” had been introduced way back in 1871. It was a relic of the times of the “*Kulturkampf*” (the conflict between the Catholic Church and the German Government at Bismarck’s time, mainly over the government’s efforts to control education, civil marriage etc.). This paragraph stipulated:

“A clergyman who, in the exercise of his profession, deals publicly and in the presence of a crowd with state affairs in a way that is liable to disturb the public peace, will be sentenced to imprisonment of up to two years...”

Consequently, for the Oblates in preaching ministry, especially for the big group of parish missionaries, it was very easy to come into conflict with the Nazi authorities. A good number of Oblate preachers were denounced, brought before the courts and sent to prison.

**Fr. Johannes
Zimmermann**
OMI
1908-1965

Case 29: Denounced for abuse of the pulpit.

As a young priest, Fr. Zimmermann in his sermons at Molzbach near Hünfeld in 1936 described the Nazi doctrine of Blood and Race as “*idolatry*”. In October 1937 he was denounced, but no action could be taken against him because his superiors had given him a rushed obedience for the Juniorate at Striegau, Silesia.

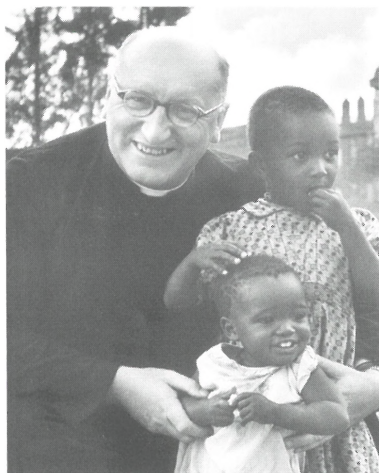
**Fr. Heinrich
Künker**
OMI
1885-1960

Case 30: Trial for abuse of the pulpit.

Fr. Künker had to answer charges for having made subversive comments against Nazi ideology during a parish mission. The proceedings were quashed, however, on August 10th, 1938.

**Fr. Franz
Kister**
OMI
1904-1989

Case 31: Denounced for abuse of the pulpit.



Father Kister was denounced for subversive remarks in two of his sermons. The charge was retracted, thanks to the endeavours of an attorney at Frankfurt. Later, during a visit to his home village of Grüsselbach near Hünfeld, he was accused of abusing the pulpit by political and subversive statements. Procedures dragged on from 1935 till 1939.

Since no penalty more than six months of prison was normally given in such cases, Fr. Kister benefitted from an amnesty in August 1939. In 1940 Fr. Kister was appointed superior of the Oblate house at Kattowitz in German-occupied Poland, where he did his best to help the Polish

Oblates - an activity that demanded no little courage. He even succeeded in taking legal proceedings against an officer of the S.S. who had called him a “*Bolshevist*”.

**Fr. Jakob
Steffes
OMI
1898-1966**

Case 32: Five weeks in preventive arrest.

Fr. Steffes was a member of the Oblate community at Oberelchingen. A sermon on September 14th, 1941, brought him into conflict with the Secret Police. The Nazis had just ordered that from all crucifixes, traditionally part of the furnishing of classrooms, were to be removed from all schools. Despite his being aware of the full consequences, Father Steffes pointed out in a sermon that this measure was ultimately aimed at nothing less than the elimination of Christianity. Consequently the Ministry of the Interior ordered him to be taken into preventive arrest for five weeks.



**Fr. Nikolaus
Stehle
OMI
1878-1957**

Case 33: One year in prison.

Fr. Stehle, superior of the Oblates at Aufhofen, was a parish missionary, and had preached against the rise of Nazism as early as 1929. He had been one of the earliest ones to see through the externals to the dark heart of Nazi philosophy and practice. In 1939 he had to answer for his sermons before the district court at Ulm. He was pronounced guilty and sentenced to one year in prison which he served at Ulm.

Law against treachery

As early as 1934 any sort of criticism against the ideology, the system and the representatives of N.S. was declared a criminal act liable to be punished. The corresponding law said (approximately):

“...Whoever speaks disrespectfully and with a base intention about personalities of the State or the NSDAP, about their decrees or about the institutions created by them, so that the loyalty of the people towards the Government might be undermined, will be punished by imprisonment...”

Such was the legal basis for proceeding against any expression of opinion not in conformity with the N.S. party line.

Fr. Gregor
Möder
OMI
1908-1985

Case 34: Four months detention pending trial.

On March 30, 1939, Father Möder was sentenced to four months in prison for violating the law of treachery. This penalty, however, was considered as having been served by the four months detention pending trial. In a sermon at Oberufhausen near Hünfeld he had said: *“The danger of Bolshevism is still great, now even more so since Hitler concluded a friendly pact with Stalin. I call upon you to resist, not with bayonets or other arms, but with the Rosary.”* The local functionary of the NSDAP had reported this remark to the authorities. This conflict with the Secret Police had one good result for Fr. Möder - namely to prevent his being called to military service. He was considered unreliable. When towards the end of the war the Gestapo agents were searching for him again, he went into hiding.

Fr. Luzian
Schaller
OMI
1903-1976

Case 35: Repeated interrogation by the Secret Police.

On May 2nd, 1939, Fr. Schaller was reported for having violated the law against treachery. On February 2nd, 1940, the special court of Munich dismissed the case because of

lack of evidence. During the following years Fr. Schaller was repeatedly summoned by the Secret Police under various pretexts. In 1942 he was suspected because of his pastoral work among foreign workers. In 1943 he was reported to have organized illegal collections of money, and in 1944, because of several trips he had undertaken, he was suspected of sabotage.

**Fr. Wilhelm
Schäfer**
OMI
1897-1961

Case 36: Ban on teaching.

Fr. Schäfer belonged to the Oblate community at Gojau, Sudeten-Province, and was reported on the same day as Fr. Schaller, on May 2nd, 1939, for violating the law against treachery. The investigations by the special court of Munich were dismissed after the amnesty decreed by Hitler on September 9th, 1939. In October 1940 he was forbidden to teach because “*his attitude in school lacks loyalty towards the state*”. On the 14th of June 1940, Fr. Schäfer had made negative comments about the occupation of Paris by the German army.

**Fr. Johannes
Degenhardt**
OMI
*1912

Case 37: Sentenced to one year in prison.

Fr. Degenhardt was assistant priest at Warnsdorf, Sudeten Province, from 1941 to 1942. On February 2nd, 1942, he was taken into police custody at Leipzig because of political remarks he had made in public. At the same time he received his call to conscription for military service. He joined the army after being released from



custody. While in the army, the proceedings against him went on. The Special Court of Leipzig sentenced him for violation of the law against treachery on July 20th, 1942. At the time he was serving as infirmarian on the front. The sentence was suspended for the length of the war, and thus he was saved the indignity and hardship of life in prison.

**Fr. Franz
Schoenen
OMI
1892-1989**

Case 38: One year in prison.



In a shop at Hünfeld, in the presence of some people, Fr. Schoenen made negative political remarks which were reported to the police and judged “*extremely subversive*”. He was arrested on October 6th, 1939. After detention pending trial, which lasted for a long time, his trial started on August 10th, 1940. He was sentenced to one year prison for violating the law

against treachery and was detained at the police prison at Kassel.

**Fr.
Karl-Josef
Montag
OMI
1885-1969**

Case 39: Ten weeks custody in the Gestapo prison.

Fr. Montag was parish priest at Frischau in the Sudeten Province. Critical remarks he made on an occasion against the regime were interpreted and judged by the local authorities as being in violation of the law against treachery. He was kept in custody by the Gestapo from August 25 to November 7, 1942.

Fr. Johannes
Nicolaus
OMI
1882-1951

Case 40: Two years in prison.

During the Nazi Regime Fr. Nicolaus spent two years in prison for political reasons. The details and background cannot be ascertained any more. The reason for his detention, however, was the usual violation of the law against treachery.

Concentration Camp

The most dreaded punishment inflicted by the Nazi regime was committal to a concentration camp. For many it meant certain death, especially for the elderly and the sick. At the Dachau concentration camp there was a section or block exclusively for priests. Out of 418 German priests who were sent to different concentration camps during the regime, 110 died. In 1941 there were 112 German priests in the priests' block at Dachau (besides many from other nations, especially from Poland - 35 Polish Oblates were sent to concentration camps, where 13 of them died).

Fr. Engelbert
Rehling
OMI
1905-1976

Case 41: Four years at Dachau Concentration Camp.

Fr. Rehling was the only German Oblate sent to a concentration camp. As early as 1934 this young parish missionary was reported for "*pacifist statements*" during a sermon. Though the case was dismissed, he was now on the files of the Secret Police. When, during a discussion with a postman, he contradicted his Nazi opinions, he was again reported to the Secret Police, and arrested at Kaldenhausen on October 28, 1941.



After two months detention pending trial he was sent to Dachau Concentration Camp where he joined the other clerics in the priests' block. In 1942, the German Bishops' Conference intervened with the government on behalf of Fr. Rehling, but to no avail. Four years at the camp meant for Fr. Rehling an immense lot of suffering, and humiliation. Forced labour, hunger and sickness ruined his health. Yet he was among the few surviving prisoners when liberation came with the end of the war and the fall of the Nazi regime.

Death Sentence

Death sentence for various reasons was pronounced during the Nazi regime against 59 German Catholic priests. One of them was an Oblate.

**Fr. Friedrich
Lorenz
OMI
1897-1944**

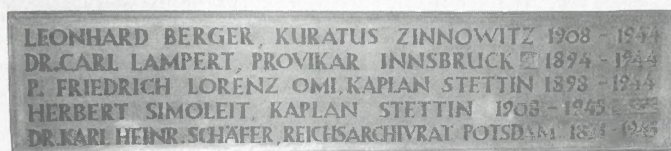
Case 42: Sentenced to death.

In 1942 Fr. Lorenz was assistant priest at the central parish of St. John the Baptist at Stettin, in a predominantly Protestant area. In the evenings he occasionally met with other priests and with soldiers on leave. Only one civilian, a foreigner from Austria, apparently a fervent Catholic, took part in these meetings. In reality he was a Gestapo spy who had managed to worm his way into this circle and had gained the confidence of the



*Fr. Friedrich Lorenz, O.M.I.,
Army Chaplain, World War II*

participants. Naturally the group did not only talk about matters of Church and Faith, but also about the political and military situation, and many critical and negative comments were made. All these the unrecognized agent of the Secret Police reported to his department. During the night of February 4/5 Fr. Lorenz was arrested together with 13 more priests of the Stettin area. He was charged with violating the “broadcasting laws” (i.e. he had listened to enemy radio propaganda), with subversive statements during the above mentioned meetings, with spreading defeatism among soldiers, and with fraternizing with enemy persons (he had had contact with French forced-labour convicts). There followed endless interrogations, sometimes under torture, and 21 months in prison. On September 23, 1944, Fr. Lorenz was sentenced to death. Appeals for mercy by the Bishop of Berlin and the German Provincial were of no avail. He was beheaded on November 11th, 1944 at Halle.



Memorial Plaque, Berlin Cathedral, to the five “Berlin Martyrs”, including Fr. Lorenz, O.M.I.

Consequences of the War

The Second World War, though it had multiple remote causes, was a direct result of Nazi politics. The German Oblates, whether serving in the army or not, had their share in the great amount of suffering it brought to the people, and some of them in a particularly hard way.

Killed in action, missing, leaving religious life.

Out of 327 German Oblates drafted for military service, 82 lost their lives during the war: 56 died on the front or in consequence of wounds received; 26 are missing and presumed dead.

72 Oblates, mainly Scholastics and younger Brothers, did not come back to the Oblates after the war.

42 Oblates spent difficult years as prisoners of war. 37 of these were released only as late as 1947.

All these Oblates have to be included among the victims of the Nazi regime. In April 1939, the German Province had 521 members; in 1947 they were only 384. The number of Oblates of the Sudeten Province was 64 at the beginning of the war, and had shrunk to 44 at the end.

Situation of Oblate Establishments

There were about 230, mostly elderly, German Oblates from both provinces not drafted for military service. Besides the problems inherent in the fact of belonging to a suspected group of people (i.e. priests, religious), they shared the everyday sufferings and horrors of the war like everybody else - constant threat of air raids, shortage of food and other necessities of life, and as well as being expected to console and strengthen many people who had lost their relatives or their home and belongings.

The Oblate houses at Kronach and Lahnstein were seriously damaged by bombs, but remained habitable. The houses at Gelsenkirchen and Essen-Borbeck suffered heavy damage. The house at Breslau was so gravely damaged that it had to be given up. Complete destruction came to the houses at Munich and the house and church at Stettin Züllchow.

In the Sudeten Province the houses at Aussig and Eger were heavily bombed. The house at Altwasser burnt down after an air raid.

The confiscated houses at Hünfeld, Valkenburg, Aachen and Saarbrücken were returned to the Oblates soon after the

war. Establishments in the formerly German eastern territories like the ones at Breslau, Langendorf, Striegau and Stettin had to be given up under Soviet occupation. The Sudeten Province in 1946 kept only the houses at Gojau, Warnsdorf and Eger, since all the German Oblates had been expelled from Czechoslovakia.

Epilogue

The history of the German Oblates during the period of Nazism is typical of that of many male religious institutes in conflict with the ideology and the regime. German Oblates, as members of the German and Sudeten Provinces, bore witness in tacit or open resistance. As representatives of the Catholic Church and as religious they could not remain indifferent towards what went on in the world between 1933 and 1945. Many saw very clearly the pernicious tendencies that were developing in Germany. Some took the risk of losing their lives by standing up for the truth. It was a period when the religious were challenged to live fully their charism.

The Nazi regime was ruthless and pitiless towards all opponents, whether real or suspected ones. Many Oblates experienced threats and intimidation, met with hostilities and were exposed to persecution. All this, and not least the years of the war, have deeply marked their personality for life. Their witness, though of the past, and here only briefly and insufficiently described, remains a challenge for the present, when no less radicalism and firmness is demanded of the disciples of Christ.

“In our days, too, we are called upon to give to God what belongs to God, for only then will we also give to man what belongs to man!”

(Blessed Rupert Mayer SJ)

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