

Martyrs at the Hearth – The Social- Religious Roles of Resistance Women During Nazi Germany

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I. Introduction

Interest in the resistance to Nazi oppression in Germany has only in recent years gained a wider audience in the United States. Outside the geographic borders of Germany, people have operated under the false assumption that nearly everyone in Germany fell in lockstep with Nazi ideology. Nothing could be farther from the truth. There were several resistance groups which operated independently within German society. One of those groups was the *Bekennende Kirche* (Confessing Church), which split from the Lutheran Church when it accepted Hitler as the head of the church and instituted the *Aryan Paragraph*. After many of the pastors of the Confessing Church were either imprisoned or were no longer permitted to preach in their pulpits, the women of the church continued the work covertly and overtly. In fact, the resistance movement could not have been sustained without the work of the women.

In this paper I want to offer a brief historical overview of the theoretical forces that shaped the culture of that period. Among those are Immanuel Kant, and Walter Benjamin. Additionally, I will evaluate their influence on the feminists' movement of the early twentieth century and theorize how this influence was instrumental in empowering a number of women to resist Nazi oppression. Two women who contributed greatly to this resistance will be highlighted in this paper. Else Niemöller, the wife of the famous resistance pastor, Martin Niemöller, and Marga Meusel who worked with the *Innere Mission* in Berlin are two of the women to whom I give special attention. Both of these women have for the most part been marginalized by history, but have nonetheless played a major role in stemming this floodtide of evil that spread over their beloved Germany.

II. A Brief History of the Weimar Republic

Not only was Weimar Germany a time of unprecedented change, it was also a time of broad contradictions in society. Various political parties struggled for dominance. The Bolshevik movement, led by Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, attempted to capitalize on the political instability in

Germany. They wanted to create a Soviet style government (Gay, 1968, p. 148). The Social Democrats also battled for power with the conservative National People's Party. On January 19, 1919, 30 million people turned out to vote, despite the Communist boycott, and the Social Democrats received the largest number of seats (163 out of 421). The assembly elected Friedrich Ebert as President; he in turn asked Scheidemann to form a cabinet. The cabinet consisted of the three leading parties – the Social Democrats, the Center, and the Democrats. Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg were murdered in Berlin on January 15, 1919 and Kurt Eisner was killed on February 28, 1919. These killings brought about a general workers' strike, which led to the proclamation of a Socialist Councils' Republic (Gay, 1968). These were but the birth pangs of the new Republic. The political upheaval continued throughout its ephemeral existence. Peter Gay writes,

Its tormented brief life with its memorable artifacts and its tragic death – part murder, part wasting sickness, part suicide – have left their imprint on men's minds, often vague perhaps, but always splendid. When we think of Weimar, we think of modernity in art, literature, and thought; we think of the rebellion of sons against fathers, Dadaists against art, Berliners against beefy philistinism, libertines against old-fashioned moralists; with think of *Threepenny Opera*, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, *The Magic Mountain*, the *Bauhaus*, Marlene Dietrich (Gay, 1968, p. xiii).

In spite of its cultural contributions, the political upheaval was but an indicator of the social upheaval that was to ensue. Class or *Stand* was still the determining factor of one's success in life, but the middle class had become impoverished during the Weimar Republic. Various social forces were at play during that time. The youth were longing for harmonious wholeness, and being disenchanted with the ruling class, they showed their rebellion in part by forming what Peter Gay calls "homoerotic friendships" (Gay, 1968, p. 77). The working class continued to be influenced by Communist ideologies while the middle

and lower class adults rejected normative social rules. These changes brought about a “revolution” within the female population as well.

III. Women’s Rights During the Weimar Republic

As Bridenthal and Koonz (1973) suggest in their essay “Beyond Kinder, Küche, Kirche: Weimar Women at Work” the role of women during Weimar Germany suffered greatly from male domination, not only in the public sphere, but also in the private sphere. They write, “[d]espite much rhetoric about the rights of women, Germans did not envision a change in the traditional role of women. . . .Without an appealing alternative, women persisted in their loyalty to the familiar *Kinder, Küche, Kirche* ethos and saw emancipation more often as a threat than as a blessing” (Roos, 2006). Not all women saw themselves as fitting that role, however. Manja Seelen (1995) writes in her book *Das Bild der Frau in Werken deutscher Künstlerinnen und Künstler der neuen Sachlichkeit*, that women sought a new way of expressing themselves and a new way of defining their roles as mothers, friends, lovers, and wives. The *New Objectivity* had found its way into the hearts and minds of women, and Seelen claims that the refrain of an operetta *Eine Frau, die weiß, was sie will* (A woman, who knows what she wants) is characteristic of the leitmotif of the Twenties and early Thirties (Seelen, 1995).

Germany was by no means alone in this societal change. The United States and Russia displayed similar transformations of traditional gender roles. Fredrick Lewis Allen argues in his book *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the Nineteen-Twenties*, that women after World War I underwent the same kind of social revolution as did the women of Weimar Germany. They refused to “settle down into the humdrum routine of American life as if nothing had happened, to accept the moral dicta of elders who seemed to be living in a Pollyanna land of rosy ideals which the war had killed for them” (Allen, 2000, p. 82). American women celebrated their new found freedom in their clothing and hairstyles, and through their public and private behavior (i.e. smoking parties, drinking gin, etc.). They rejected the traditional “Gibson Girl” paradigm for the image of the “Flapper” (Allen, 2000). The Communist

revolution in Russia had also liberated women. Lenin criticized men for forcing their wives into traditional gender roles and encouraged them to “purge their minds of this ‘slave-owner’s point of view’, take on their share of the housework, and encourage their wives to concentrate on useful occupations in the public sector” (Clements, 1997, p. 192).

In Weimar Germany, women saw themselves as mothers and as the one constant in the maelstrom of society’s upheaval, while they demanded more freedom and equality. This phenomenon is explained in an essay by Siegfried Kracauer titled “Working Women” (*Mädchen im Beruf*) in Anton Kaes’ *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*. Although women were often portrayed in popular films as secretaries or typists, whose goals were to marry either the boss or a rich American, reality was quite different. Women flocked to the work place in unprecedented numbers, but their goals were much different from those portrayed on the silver screen. Kracauer maintains that women of the impoverished middle class and working class made up the bulk of the female workforce. Most were single women (only 7 to 11 per cent had husbands). This increase in female employment was partly due to the fact that two million German men died in combat and over four million were wounded. The preferred profession of women was that of the *stenotypist* (Kaes, Anton et al, 1994, p. 217). Society viewed this as the appropriate profession for women because of the innate dexterity they possessed (Kittler, 1999). While few were encouraged to pursue higher education, the Weimar *Reichstag*¹ had an unprecedented number of female representatives. The *Verfassung* punished women for having abortions² while at the same time many women explored their newly found sexual freedoms.

¹ Approximately 10 per cent of the elected officials in Weimar Germany in 1919 were women. Germany did not reach this level of representation again until 1983. (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung)

² The story is told by Gabriele Tergit in her essay “Paragraph 218: A Modern Gretchen Tragedy” of a young woman who was coerced into having an illegal abortion by her boyfriend. This “illegal act” was then brought to trial and both the woman and the man were punished with jail time. She received two weeks, suspended to probation and he received two months in jail, which was served. (Kaes, 1994, p. 203)

IV. Theorists Who Influenced Weimar Germany

A. Immanuel Kant

Immanuel Kant, one of the foremost German philosophers, with whom “modern thought” began (Schönfeld, 2008), was one who raised the issue of gender equality. He advocates that all human beings are to be treated equally and justly, simply because it is the right thing to do and a well-ordered society depends on it. What is right and acceptable for one person must be applicable to all members of society (*the Categorical Imperative*). While some claim that Kant was not necessarily a religious man, that is to say, that he was more of a pantheist than a monotheist, he nevertheless incorporated many religious ideals into his books and lectures. In his book *Lectures on Ethics* (Kant, 1963), Kant addresses the idea of loving one’s neighbor as the fundamental paradigm for any society. For Kant this is not necessarily an abstract, religious concept that is often accompanied by a “warm fuzzy feeling.” Rather it is a conscious choice to respect the rights and properties of other human beings. He advocates that it would be better to have a cool-hearted neighbor on whom one could depend than to have someone who is expressive of his or her emotions but is not dependable.

Schönfeld argues that Kant’s mother probably had the greatest influence on his enlightened thinking. Although she was one of the first Pietistic converts in eighteenth-century Königsberg, she taught her children tolerance and love for nature. Kant writes, “I will never forget my mother, for she implanted and nurtured in me the first germ of goodness; she opened my heart to the impressions of nature; she awakened and furthered my concepts, and her doctrines have had a continual and beneficial influence in my life” (Schönfeld, 2008). Kant did not hesitate to credit his philosophical basis to a woman.

B. Walter Benjamin

There is no doubt in my mind that Benjamin was greatly influenced by the philosophies of Immanuel Kant. While Benjamin was known during Weimar Germany, he was not famous. This is

Hannah Arendt's claim in her essay about Walter Benjamin, which introduces Benjamin's book *Illumination*. His life was filled with mishaps. Benjamin was plagued by a deep melancholy, perhaps because he could not fulfill his father's expectations of him, or because he expected too much of himself. Hannah Arendt claims that he viewed his life as "piles of debris" (Benjamin, 2007, p. 7). Benjamin felt powerless to change life, even "if it was about to crush him" (p. 7).

In addition to Kant's influence, Goethe and Marx helped shape the thinking of Walter Benjamin - Goethe because of his humanistic approach to society and striving for goodness in himself and the people around him, and Marx because of his ideals of social justice. Benjamin held to many Marxist ideals, much to the dismay of his father. He enjoyed a close friendship with Theodore Adorno. Adorno was a musician and was also associated with the *Frankfurt School*, but was forced to emigrate to the United States when Hitler came to power. Benjamin and Adorno interacted with each other through the exchange of lengthy letters. Benjamin's correspondence with Adorno concerning his *Arcades Project* demonstrates the deep respect they felt for each other.

While Benjamin embraced aspects of Jewish intellectualism in Weimar Germany, he also criticized it for its "politicization of the intelligentsia" (Jennings, 1999, p. 417). His overt criticism of Expressionism is found in his essay "Critique of the New Objectivity." In it he writes that "on the one hand, it is undoubtedly hostile in fictions removed from reality...on the other hand, it attacks theory" (p. 417). He felt that "never before has a generation of young writers been less interested in the theoretical legitimation" than what he observed in Weimar Germany (Jennings, 1999). Benjamin saw the attempt of creating the *New Objectivity* as a futile endeavor to identify with the common man. No matter how hard the intellectual may try to become a proletarian, he will never succeed in this endeavor, for his class or *Stand* prevents him (Jennings, 1999). Benjamin rejected both elitism and nationalism.

This dichotomy between the Jewish intellectuals and his own theoretical orientation contributed to his loneliness. Hannah Arendt argues that Benjamin was like a man from another time, and never felt

“at home in twentieth-century Germany” (Benjamin, 2007, p. 19). When he moved to Paris, he finally felt that he had returned to where he belonged. His trip from Berlin to Paris was not a trip from one country to another; rather it was a return to the nineteenth century from the twentieth (p.19). He loved the city and its architecture. For Benjamin the *flâneur* became the object of his imagination, more than likely because he was that *flâneur* himself. As much as Paris “taught Benjamin *flânerie*, the nineteenth century’s secret style of walking and thinking” so equally Berlin had alienated and isolated him and had contributed to his *transcendental homelessness*, so typical of Weimar Germany (Benjamin, 2007, p. 99). Benjamin, as well as many of his contemporary Jewish intellectuals, struggled with the paradigm of the Jewish middle class. He found the display of material goods distasteful. The favored alternatives to this bourgeois existence were either Zionism, of which Gershom Scholem availed himself, or Marxism, and Benjamin was committed to neither. Instead Benjamin sought “consistency in truth”. His work in philosophy was clearly inspired by theology, and truth for Benjamin “concerned a secret and that revelation of this secret had authority” (Benjamin, 2007, p. 41).

C. Feminist Theory

As women were beginning to find their voice in Weimar Germany, and, in fact, in all of modernized Europe and the United States, they were no longer willing to submit to male dominance. Instead, according to Else Herrman, they lived for the present and followed their own desires (Kaes, Anton et al, 1994).

Ann Cahill, in her salient analysis of feminisms, sheds light on the various types of feminists’ theories that have shaped twentieth century thinking. While admitting that many of the theorists to whom she refers are post-World War II writers, I would argue that their thinking was nonetheless shaped by the early twentieth century women’s movement³. Taking into account Kantian theory and

³ Werner Thönnessen writes in his book *The Emancipation of Women*, that the rights of women and their roles in society in terms of nurturing the young and the old, must be considered when forming labor laws for the protection of women (Thönnessen, 1973). These considerations are paramount for the well-being of society.

the social upheaval that followed World War I, one can easily see why some women were willing to abandon traditional gender roles.

Simone de Beauvoir, an existentialist feminist writer, identifies one of the problems within the sphere of women; women define themselves in terms of men, and since words are powerful in the Heideggerian sense, these enigmatic words define reality. “Man” has become synonymous with “human” and thereby relegates women to a place of lesser importance (Cahill, 2008). Simone de Beauvoir addresses these sentiments in her book *The Second Sex* (Beauvoire, 2010). She argues that not only do women define themselves in terms of men “He is Subject, He is the Absolute; she is the “Other” (Appelrouth, 2007, p. 317), but also women will often use their femininity to garner favors from men. In fact, according to Beauvoir, breaking with conventions, women risk alienation. While Beauvoir did not move into the foreground of the women’s movement until after World War II, her objections to society and in particular her objections as they related to the role of women, can be applied to women in pre-World War II Germany. The distressing fact is that women themselves did not value the effect they had on society, because they accepted the status quo, which the male dominated society established.

Judith Butler argues, however, that the entire construct of femininity is based on learned roles. Enlightenment failed to bring about the equality of the genders. Although it advocated the worth of humanity and human beings in general, social constructs continued to define gender roles, and laws enabled those gender roles to be reinforced. With all of feminism’s claims to a more enlightened society, it failed to produce the real fruit of equality (Cahill, 2008).

Cahill further claims that early feminism attempted simply to alter laws to be inclusive of the female gender without paying heed to the social and physical demands placed on women. Women are not only expected to perform productively in the workplace, they are also expected to fulfill their reproductive responsibilities. Most human beings have at some point been nurtured by someone, and that ‘someone’ was most likely a woman. Women in general not only care for the young but also for the

elderly. So to claim that all is needed is to find suitable places of employment for women in which they can be “equal to men” is simply overlooking the broader responsibilities many women face in everyday life.

Evelyn Fox Keller shows, as does Nancy Chodorow, that “the fundamental congruence between maleness as culturally defined and the scientific world view dominated Western thought.” Furthermore she claims that “modern Western thought is ‘genderized’ – that is, it is associated in the cultural sense with ‘maleness’ and ‘masculinity’” (Levesque-Lopman, 1988, p. 50). Levesque-Lopman further argues that men have “constructed Western thought and history”, and have set the values that have become the guiding principles for society. Men have objectified women and have constructed them as the “Other”, which allowed them to be the “Not -Other”. Historic writers have treated women’s experiences “as secondary or invisible” (Levesque-Lopman, 1988, pp. 51-52)). Certainly these factors helped to define historic writing, but perhaps another aspect was that women were not demanding to be included in historic narratives. It is difficult to determine the entire scope of this phenomenon, one thing is certain nonetheless, that this should not be allowed to continue.

The challenges Weimar women faced were no different from those described by modern feminist thinkers: they wanted to break out of the socially constructed gender roles, wanted to be viewed as equals and have the same opportunities as their male counterpart, while struggling with responsibilities at home. To its credit, Weimar Germany did bring about changes in how women were viewed, and laws were passed to allow for greater gender equality, and protection of women and children in the workplace (Thönnessen, 1973). Germany during the early nineteenth hundreds was divided into the public sphere and the private sphere. The former was dominated by men, while the latter “belonged” to women. In spite of this classification, during the Weimar Republic there were an unprecedented number of women who were active in the public sphere. However, this was an

ephemeral phenomenon.⁴ Notwithstanding the winds of change that were sweeping across Germany during the Weimar Republic, women nonetheless struggled with their own identities. As this short-lived attempt at democracy began to lose its power in Germany and a political change loomed on the horizon, the role of women began to revert back to the conventions of earlier times. Women were once again given the role of the homemaker as their primary duty. The rise of National Socialism in Germany, however, changed the landscape of women's rights. Ursula Mahlendorf argues in her book *The Shame of Survival* that Nazi rule provided women with opportunities for advancement within the framework of the party, while at the same time elevating the traditional gender roles as the societal model. Women were again viewed as reproductive entities of society (Mahlendorf, 2009).

V. The Confessing Church's resistance to Nazi Germany

As the Nazi government dug its "claws" into the fabric of society and attempted to bring everything under its dominance, including the church, many Germans, among whom were theologians from the ranks of the Catholic and the Lutheran churches, opposed Hitler, and the Lutheran church experienced a severe split as a result of its acceptance of Nazi ideology and the institution of the *Arierparagraph*⁵. The *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung* examined the diverse aspects of German resistance in its publication *Information zur politischen Bildung Heft 243*. The first clear sign of resistance, the author writes, was sent within Germany and to the outside world through the assassination attempt by Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg. That is not to say, the article continues, that the German people did not resist before July 20, 1944, but the resistance consisted of relative small

⁴ There were 41 elected women representatives in the Reichstag during the Weimar Republic which amounted to approximately 9.6 per cent. A sizeable representation, indeed, that was not reached again until 1983. By 1930 that portion had sunk again to 6.3 per cent.
<http://www.hh.schule.de/gybu/fachbereiche/geschichte/frauen/Weimar/referat.html>

⁵ The *Arierparagraph* was a law passed on April 7, 1933, which forbade non-Aryans to hold official government positions and was eventually extended to the churches. Even Jews who had converted to Christianity had to be cast out of the church.

groups or individuals. Benz continues that there were approximately 7000 people who “were known by name” to the Nazi regime, but that was by no means the full extent (Benz, 2000). Some resisted for religious reasons (i.e. religious dominance of the Nazi government), others because of purely humanitarian reasons (i.e. violation of human rights), while yet others opposed the regime for political reasons. One thing is clear from Wolfgang Benz’s writings: the groups were fragmented and lacked cooperation with each other.

The German church experienced a severe split during Nazi Germany and struggled to come to terms with its guilt after the war was over. Hockenos delineates with great insight the development of the Confessing Church and the split. At the end of the Weimar Republic, many Germans saw in Hitler a way out of the political, social, and economic situation. There were many well-intended Germans, among whom were a number of Protestant church leaders, who voted for the Nazi Party. It was not until Hitler seized complete power in Germany after the elections in 1933, that the church fathers became aware of his true intention. In 1934 the Evangelical church adopted the Aryan Paragraph, which dismissed any baptized Jew from the church. This wide-spread sweep extended not only to the church, but to institutes of higher learning as well (Hockenos, 2004).

Martin Niemöller, although a supporter of Hitler initially, was one of those who resisted for religious reasons, and he, along with seven other pastors, founded the Pastor’s Emergency League (*Pfarrernotbund*). From that initial group the Confessing Church (*Bekennende Kirche*) came into being. Many of the pastors of the Confessing Church were arrested for refusing to “render unto Caesar the things that were God’s.” As a result many were killed, imprisoned, or placed in concentration camps. From the *Bekennende Kirche* alone, 18 pastors were murdered in concentration camps (Nationalsozialismus, 2009). This left a great void within the Confessing Church, and it was the women, some of whom were pastors’ wives or lay women, who continued the work of the church left vacant by many of the imprisoned pastors.

VI. Women within the Confessing Church

The central argument of my research is that the women who were engaged in the “resistance work” were empowered by the liberation they found within the feminist movement of the early twentieth century. As already stated above, it was the women who continued the work of opposing Nazi ideology after many of the pastors of the Confessing Church had been arrested, and without their tireless efforts the resistance could not have survived. These women preached, lied to authorities, hid Jews, provided them with false papers and ration cards, and took care of the children who had been abandoned – all at the risk of their own lives. There are undoubtedly numerous women who deserve recognition, but to our great shame many have been denied the honor due them.

A. Else Niemöller - Wife of Prisoner 26679

Not everyone is called upon by history to perform that *one* great heroic deed, nonetheless the sum of one’s life should amount to significance. Into this latter category I would place Else Niemöller. She was a great German woman who distinguished herself through her contributions and her sufferings. In the case of Else Niemöller, she is defined by history as “the wife of Martin Niemöller” and as such she takes a secondary role in history, when in fact she should have been placed on equal footing with her husband.

Else Niemöller was an educated woman. She held a teaching degree in English and spent some time abroad. She felt a deep loyalty to the German Empire, the family, and the German church. She was the wife of an important man and stood by him as they resisted the floodtide of evil that swept across their beloved Germany.

Born in 1890, Else Niemöller belonged to the “Lost Generation” of the late nineteenth hundreds, the generation whose lives were truncated by the beginning of the First World War. She was born into a bourgeois family. Her father was a family physician whose practice of medicine focused on the working class and artisans in Elberfeld’s neighborhood. He was, according to one of Else Niemöller’s sons, “well

respected and much loved. “ Else was university educated and taught English. She spent two years living abroad in England. In those days, it was rare for women to enroll in university studies in Germany. In 1908 only 3,436 women attended German universities, a number which grew to nearly 20,000 by 1930. (Thomas, 1995, p. 88). When she married Martin Niemöller in 1919, she gave up her professional career in order to devote her life to her husband’s career and to the care of her family. The early years of the Weimar Republic were characterized by hyper-inflation due in part to the heavy burden that was placed on the fledgling democracy by the Treaty of Versailles. Germans endured much hardship during that time and the young married couple was no exception. Initially Niemöller had decided to become a farmer in Argentina, and to prepare for this *Beruf*, he worked on a farm in Prussia. His wife and child lived with a family about 7 kilometers away, and they saw each other only on Sundays. During that time Else Niemöller learned to milk cows, prepare the proper food for pigs, and she also studied Spanish. Her husband eventually decided that this was not his calling and decided to follow in his father’s footsteps and study theology. While engaged in his theological studies he took whatever job was offered to him in order to support his ever growing family.

When life became difficult and there was not enough money to feed the family, Else Niemöller did not turn to prostitution or other self-abasing and self-destructive behavior, as had many of the women in literary works such as Irmgard Keun’s *Artificial Silk Girl* or Alfred Döblin’s in *Berlin Alexander Platz*. Instead, she carefully removed the gold ribbon off of her husband’s well preserved World War I uniform and sold it to a jeweler, who melted it down to extract the gold. They sold their family treasures - a 1545 Luther Bible, and a chronometer which was a keepsake from his time as a U-Boot Captain – to feed their children. After finishing his theology studies in 1924, Martin Niemöller was ordained. Initially he worked for the *Innere Mission* (Home mission), a part of the *Landeskirche*, and eventually accepted a position as pastor of the prestigious Berlin-Dahlem congregation. By 1935 Else had borne seven children and had become a devoted wife, mother, and *Pfarrfrau*. The expectations

society placed on the wife of a pastor at that time were great. Church law forbade wives of pastors to be employed outside of the home. They were expected to be a “model housewife and mother” who was committed to church, home, school, and community. She had to be a member of the Protestant Ladies’ Auxiliary and fulfill the role of a “Seelsorger” if necessary. Many testimonials confirm the fact that she fulfilled all those roles. She also served as the sounding board of her husband’s sermons and would often counsel him in the delivery of his messages. She was his encourager, supporter, and travel companion. Else Niemöller was not in the business of self promotion. She was content to live in her husband’s shadow. When he was arrested for the sixth time on July 1, 1937 (This time his arrest would last for nearly eight years instead of just a day as the other five had), she continued to support him. She never asked him to deny what he had said about Hitler. She faithfully carried on the duties as *Pfarrfrau* while he was away and continued to be the very best mother she knew to be during those years.

I would like to point to another piece of evidence of her commitment to see the struggle against Nazi Germany through to the end. In the early years when it became apparent that Hitler’s intentions were not benevolent toward the church, several English Protestant pastors in collaboration with some Nazi officers offered to smuggle the family out of Germany. Even then she agreed with her husband not to leave Germany. Instead she endured having two of her sons fight for her husband’s jailor and suffered the loss of one of her daughters to diphtheria - all this, while her husband was Hitler’s personal prisoner. One of the two sons lost his life on the Eastern front and the other was believed to be in Russian captivity after the war ended.

B. Marga Meusel – The Righteous Among the Nations

Another woman whom I would like to highlight in this discussion is Marga Meusel. A memorial plaque, which is found at the house where she lived and worked in Berlin, reveals the following,

In this house Marga Meusel worked from 1932 until 1953 as the leader of the Evangelical Charitable organization of the inner mission. She recognized early the particular dangers for

Christians who were persecuted for racial reasons and urged the Protestant Church to support them publicly in their time of need.

Very early on in the Nazi rise to power, Marga Meusel perceived the church's lack of advocacy on behalf of the Jews as a form of denying Christ. In the book *The Witnesses Were Silent*, Wolfgang Gerlach describes how Marga Meusel composed a memorandum, which was sent to the Westphalia Confessing Church leader, Koch. In this memorandum, which was also read at the convening of the Confessing Church in the Berlin suburb of Steglitz in 1935, she addresses the issue of the non-Aryan Christians (Gerlach, 1987). Meusel had written a memorandum to church leaders about the plight of "non-Aryan" Christians in May 1935. But four months later, she rewrote it, referring no longer to "non-Aryan Christians," but to all Jews, and denounced the church's silence on the matter. She particularly condemned those who saw the Nazi persecution of the Jews as God's will. "Since when has the evildoer the right to portray his evil deeds as the will of God?" she wrote to the leaders of the church (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 2004). It was imperative, she continued, that the church publicly oppose these measures and help everyone — Christian or not — affected by them.

Berlin church superintendent Martin Albertz fought to put Meusel's statement on the Steglitz Synod agenda but most delegates wanted to avoid the issue entirely. Several, in fact, threatened to leave the meeting if the "Jewish question" came up. Some even proposed a resolution explicitly supporting the State's right to regulate Jewish affairs. This, of course, would have given the Confessing Church's sanction to the Nuremberg Laws (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 2004).

As Marga Meusel was not heard by the leading personalities of the Confessing Church, she decided to continue her work covertly. Hartmut Ludwig describes her activities. Some of the Jewish social workers who were no longer allowed to work in governmental offices Marga Meusel took as interns into the *Innere Mission* and thus was able to help them in their desperate situations. After the

large scale deportations began in 1941, Marga Meusel hid many of the women in the parsonage under false identity (Hartmut, 2007).

She was a courageous women, yet not without her faults and weaknesses. In a letter to Martin Niemöller on June 3, 1937, she addressed the issue of her courage, “Should we have a run-in with the authorities, I do not expect you to come to our rescue. I take full responsibility for my actions” (Hartmut, 2007). On the occasion, however, when she was denounced for anti-Nazi statements in March 1943, the Superintendent Max Diestel persuaded her to retract her denunciation, and he was able to rescue her from certain imprisonment and death (Hartmut, 2007).

Having the courage and conviction to withstand political oppression was characteristic of Marga Meusel. She saw what was happening to the Jews in Germany and was determined to do all she could to save them from certain death. To accomplish this task she did not shrink from employing illegal means, such as providing them with false identity papers, giving them ration cards, and hiding them in her own home. Her own safety never seemed to be a major concern to her. Because of those heroic deeds, the Yad Vashem honored her in 2007, fifty-four years after her death, as *The Righteous Among The Nations* (Hartmut, 2007).

VII. Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to return to the purpose of this study and the thesis of this paper. I firmly believe that the women of the resistance movement within the Confessing Church would not have been able to do their work apart from the feminists’ influence and movement of the early twentieth century. They viewed human life as valuable and worth risking their lives protecting it. The feminists’ movement found its nexus within the Kantian idea of society.

Studying another person’s culture is a precarious task indeed, since much of what the researcher observes is filtered through his or her lens of understanding of that particular culture. This is very much the case in my own life. I believe that I understand the German culture well, since my own

roots lie deeply buried within it. Additionally my appreciation and understanding for the generation that came of age during the Weimar Republic and lived through the Third Reich has changed considerably in recent years. It was common practice during the post-war years to criticize and condemn the generation that lived through World War II and the time that lead up to it. Perhaps the motivation for such attitudes stemmed from the fact that the events that took place in Germany between 1933 and 1945 are utterly incomprehensible.

Walter Benjamin, in his essay "Left-Wing Melancholy," attacks the right wing of German politics and is quite outspoken against left-wing extremists. He writes that left wing activities of the order of Kästner, Mehring, and Tucholsky, "are the decayed bourgeoisie's mimicry of the proletariat. Their function is to give rise politically speaking not to parties, but to cliques, literarily speaking not to schools but to fashions" (Kaes, Anton et al, 1994, p. 305). His views on Weimar society are poignant and precise. For me they are also a warning sign not to fall prey to the same ideology, which prevailed after the First World War, when looking at the end of World War II. I know that I have a great empathy for the suffering of the German people after the Second World War, and especially the women. Empathy and detachment are difficult to separate, and I want to be mindful of the Benjaminian admonition to maintain objectivity.

There is a secondary motivation behind this kind of research, and this is indeed a more personal one. The study of these women has inspired me to struggle against the evils that still prevail in our time. One needs only to think of the rape and mutilation women in the Democratic Republic of Congo have suffered or the many young women from Eastern Europe and Asia who are taken into sexual slavery. These are the realities of our day, and I cannot help but reflect on my own responsibility to alleviate their suffering. If history has taught me anything, it is precisely this: the examples of those women need to become the motivation with which I approach my participation in the fight against the evil that has spread across our nation and our world.

VIII. Bibliography

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