
❖ The Passionist Heritage Newsletter ❖

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Stories From the Other Side: The Impact of Faith in a German Town During WWII

by Katherine Koch

Intro: Everyone suffers from war

A 2007 mid-summer meeting and dinner with Katherine Koch and her father Gary Koch in the Niles, Ohio area allowed me to learn about their continued research about Father Viktor Koch, C.P. With emotion and sensitivity, they expressed that their eyes had been opened. More than they ever imagined, they realized that all levels of society encountered suffering in World War II Nazi Germany. In living true to their faith, many people were faced with personal choices that had life-or-death consequences. The people of Schwarzenfeld, Germany, the essay below reveals, were included in this war matrix. Local Catholics cared for each other and in particular showed special care for Father Koch. Listening to the experiences of Bavarian Catholics and other Germans who endured wartime hardships has shaped Katherine and Gary's reflection on the meaning of human suffering. Why and how do so many people suffer in a war? In this spirit of the Passionist charism I asked Katherine to share her new areas of research about Father Koch. Reading about the daily life of Germans and Father Koch in Nazi Germany serves as a sad reminder about the realities of war today. The story remains much the same. Everyone suffers from war. What wounds will people carry with them? How will healing emerge in their lives? Perhaps the stories of those who have suffered in the past can help us understand the sufferings of today. *-The Editor*

What's This Story About?

When friends and acquaintances inquire about the ongoing family project that has consumed my father and I over the past five years, we inevitably fixate on human drama. "Well, my great granduncle was a Passionist priest who saved a German town in World War II," I explain, injecting all my own enthusiasm into that riveting statement before plunging into the historical backdrop. Fr. Viktor Koch, C.P. spent four years living within a miniscule church sacristy, peacefully resisting Nazi officials who evicted him from his monastery in Schwarzenfeld, Germany. In April 1945, when American troops discovered the gruesome remnants of a Nazi atrocity



Father Viktor Koch, C.P.

on the Bavarian town's southeastern borders, the Passionist Provincial confronted his enraged countrymen, vouched for Schwarzenfeld's innocence, and coordinated a harrowing 48-hour ordeal that spared the local population from devastating reprisals.

Once Fr. Viktor's story surfaced from the murky blue haze of distant history in 2003, we embarked upon a journey taking us from the Passionist Archives in Union City, NJ, to Schwarzenfeld and the monastery where our defiant ancestor lived behind enemy lines. The factual gems we've mined from archival research and eyewitness testimony fit together like an intricate and glittering mosaic, and as each piece snapped into place over time, the inevitable happened: we stared at the resulting picture and discovered ourselves asking new questions leading to a more profound understanding of these remarkable events. Why did Fr. Viktor remain in Schwarzenfeld, rather than return home to America? Who were these devout Catholics, the Schwarzen, who rallied behind the evicted Passionists? How did Fr. Viktor's flock respond to the malevolent political ideology entrancing the masses in Germany? Did they succumb to Nazism or resist it, retaining their identity in faith? Once our perceptions expanded to include the townspeople Fr. Viktor passionately defended from Allied forces, we realized that his experiences alone convey only half the story. His followers have their own tales to tell, and despite the ideological environment in which they lived, their wartime stories speak volumes about the

resilience of faith in this backwater Catholic village. What's this story about? Suffice it to say, it's evolved beyond the tale of a lone American priest defending German civilians from an advancing Allied spearhead.

Spiritual Warfare

As with any journey into history, it's helpful to examine the broader picture before narrowing focus on a particular place and time. During World War II, the battle lines extended far beyond the eastern and western fronts: they surged into the spiritual realm as well. When Hitler rose to power, an ideological struggle ensued between two religions—one based on love and compassion, the other forged from fanatical nationalism, yet both sought the salvation of Germany and attempted to define faith and morality according to their individual doctrines.

Nazism emerged from a black river of suffering that coursed through Germany in WWI's aftermath. Enormous war reparations stipulated in the Versailles treaty crippled the country's economic recovery, and by 1923, inflation soared—4.2 trillion Deutschmarks equaled one American dollar. Germany obtained a crucial financial lifeline from U.S. industry, which invested in its devastated business sector, but this dramatic reprieve was short lived: the 1929 Stock Market crash precipitated a worldwide depression that terminated critical money flow, utterly shattering the country's tenuous economy. The Deutschmark's plummeting value left the population starving and unemployed. Against this desolate backdrop Adolf Hitler rose to power and beguiled the downtrodden population with a message of hope and German supremacy, channeling the black river's course to achieve his own aims. When Hitler ascended to the Chancellery, Nazism developed into an ideology that bled into every aspect of daily life, replete with rituals, social belonging, moral values, and a sense of purpose. Faith in a higher power shifted to the state, and ultimately the Führer.

Eugenics was perhaps the most insidious element in Nazi ideology, contending that desired attributes of the "German race" evolved through natural selection. An Aryan who aided "lesser" races defied these evolutionary forces, allowing weaker members of society to survive another day. To the Nazis, Christianity was "anti-evolutionary" and thus "alien to the German spirit," focusing too much on forgiveness, salvation, compassion, love, mercy, racial equality, and the needs of the sick and crippled—concepts central to Christ's message on the Cross.

Ultimately, the Nazis discovered that Christianity's hold over Germany was difficult to break, and in several instances they attempted to undermine Catholicism by borrowing elements of its mysticism and ceremony. A Time Magazine article from April 13, 1942 illustrates one

case: "While thousands of young Americans prepared to receive their first Easter Communion, 1,100,000 German youths, just turned 14, had a first Nazi 'communion' two weeks before Easter — complete with organ music, readings from Mein Kampf, and sermons based on the Führer's writing. Reich Youth Leader Arthur Axmann spoke over the radio for the Berlin ceremony, cited Hitler as a name to worship and an example for all young people to follow. The Nazi 'communion' is henceforth to take place every year around Easter, to incorporate each year's new crop of youth into the party. Church Communion, as such, will not be prohibited, but the Nazis expect that the 'civil communion' will draw most of Germany's youth, and that religious services for Germans are 'doomed to be crowded out by the new life of new times.'"

On April 16, 1941, when an imperious Nazi Kreisleiter (county-level leader) demanded that Schwarzenfeld's Passionists gather their belongings and leave the Miesberg monastery within one hour, I can only imagine the whirlwind of thoughts gusting through my great granduncle's mind. Despite an economic depression, vacillating support from an American mother province, and interference from a growing National Socialist movement, the indomitable Provincial had established a German-Austrian Foundation, disproving critical superiors who predicted that his efforts would ultimately fail. I'm sure he despised the idea of returning home to fulfill their cynical expectations. Amidst the chaos, he discovered distraught parishioners flocking into the monastery courtyard, eager to help the Passionists who provided for their spiritual and material needs during Germany's depression era. He remembered the timeless bond that he and his brethren shared with the local community, a friendship cemented in the foundations of the monastery they constructed together seven years earlier. Schwarzenfeld's Catholics referred to Fr. Viktor as "our Provinsche," an endearing moniker derived from his official title *Pater Provinzial*. As his gaze drifted from one sympathetic visage to the next, perhaps he perceived the momentous importance of preaching Christ Crucified in Germany. Now more than ever, his flock needed a voice thundering from the church pulpit, reminding them that salvation is attainable only through the Cross, and that Christ is present in all who suffer—regardless of nationality, race, or creed. Of all the inspirational words my great granduncle penned nearly seventy years ago, I sense that one particular quote described his frame of mind at this moment: "Eternity is long, and will it not be worthwhile to rejoice for all eternity for overcoming difficulties and doing a great work of God, instead of having the feeling of abandoning a struggling work of God?" Rather than forsaking the townspeople who looked

to him for guidance, or the mission that brought him to Germany twenty years ago, he defied the eviction order by entrenching himself in the closet-sized church flower sacristy.

The Schwarzen

I first heard the term in May 2005, from a glib Catholic woman recounting wartime memories of Fr. Viktor in breathless torrents of German. “*Die Schwarzen*,” my translator, Fr. Gregor Lenzen C.P., explained in his characteristically serene tone, “is a term in our culture, referring to devout Catholics. In English it translates into ‘the blacks,’ referring to the black robes of the Catholic clergy.” Their personal stories chipped away at a black-white wall of preconceptions I’d made about Germans living in the Third Reich, all constructed from indelible history lessons focused on the Holocaust. Certainly the gritty facts are incontestable—Adolf Hitler seduced a despairing nation and perpetrated the death of millions. In the 1920s and early 30s, even the Catholic Church enthusiastically supported a regime that extolled the virtues of prolific, healthy families and promised to defend its populace from what the Church considered a greater evil—the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. As Nazism’s influence flourished throughout Germany, raising “Blood and Soil” to an idolatrous level, the country’s Catholics found themselves besieged between rival religions—one founded on the Cross, the other on a Swastika that demanded blind obedience from its citizens. In Schwarzenfeld, inspirational figures and stories arise from ordinary people clinging to their faith in the Cross.

Pauline Dirrigl and Anna Thanner were among the first Schwarzen to emerge from history’s pages. “I knew Paula; she was the real miracle worker for the priests,” one eyewitness confides, her memories wrapping flesh and faith around a name I’ve only seen printed in the Miesberg church’s chronicles. “She was a devoted Catholic and a poor soul in many ways. She knew the meaning of suffering because she had her own cross to bear—she was deaf, and [was sometimes ridiculed by others for this disability]. Early each morning her kitchen stove was lit, and huge pots as one might find in a restaurant were filled with meals in progress, which she prepared for her whole family, and also for Frs. Viktor and Böminghaus [living in the church’s sacristy. They had no other food source because they had been forbidden to use the monastery garden where they had previously grown their own food]. Altogether, Paula cooked for thirteen people each day... all this she did, year after year. In the hottest summer and the coldest, snowy winter her maid Anna walked up the Miesberg and delivered the food... She and other farm women were often seen walking up the hill to the church

with baskets covered by their black shawls, delivering food to the Fathers.”

While impending war loomed over Europe, Schwarzenfeld’s Catholic population witnessed a gradual erosion of religious culture and freedom. Nazi leaders deposed Herr Georg Bauer, a Catholic Bürgermeister (town mayor) who fervently supported the Passionists’ decision to open a monastery in Schwarzenfeld despite prevailing laws that prohibited the Church from establishing new institutions in Germany. Only months after construction was complete, the Nazis appointed a party loyalist in his place. Nuns were banished from Catholic schools; the fanatical instructors who replaced them instilled unquestioning loyalty to the Führer within the malleable young minds of their students. Parents answering an ominous knock on the door late at night were often hauled away to a local police station, where authorities relentlessly interrogated them for hours at a time over anti-Nazi comments uttered in a child’s presence. History records that the outspoken Norbert Gindele, a Miesberg church parishioner and steadfast friend of Fr. Viktor, refused to reticently tolerate the disturbing events unfolding around him.

“Our father was always being observed by the Nazis,” Norbert Gindele’s daughters explained during their interview in May 2005. “Often he was called and interrogated for something he had said against them. People told our mother, ‘Don’t let him speak anymore, because he is putting himself in terrible danger!’ And he certainly would have been captured or put into forced labor, but the Nazis needed him as a baker. [When government orders drafted all able-bodied men to serve on the Western Front, he was granted a deferment to remain in Schwarzenfeld and run his bakery, which provided the only source of bread for 500 local women and children]. He was a close friend of the Paters.”

When I inquire about contention between Nazism and Catholicism in Schwarzenfeld, Gindele’s daughters describe a chilling incident of persecution I’d never expected to hear from a German citizen. “Shortly before the end of the war,” they said, “there was a time where the Nazis visited our house very late at night. They were standing out in the street, shouting, demanding that our father come out because they wanted to hang him. We were small children... we remember hiding in our house in the darkness with our mother—our father was sick in the hospital. Our house was such that the bakery shop was on the first floor, and the living quarters were on the second floor. The Nazis tried knocking on the doors of our neighbors’ homes, asking for a ladder so that they could reach us through the windows, but no one answered. We

stayed quiet until they left. After the war, we discovered that the Nazis had a ‘Black List’ of people to be observed or hanged for speaking against the Reich. We learned that our father was second on that list.”

The Gindele daughters revealed that their mother Maria, while less prone to engage in confrontation, was an equally devout woman who encountered moral dilemmas and resolved them with quiet action. “During the war, there were foreign laborers working throughout Schwarzenfeld,” they explained, referring to Russian and Polish men captured by German troops, and sent to the home front to perform labor-intensive tasks ordinarily reserved for men. Draped in threadbare garb branded with shoulder patches and a bold ‘P’ for ‘Pole’ or ‘R’ for ‘Russian,’ they worked in Schwarzenfeld’s corn and wheat fields, or in the Buchtalwerks (a ceramic tile factory) by day. At night, they returned to boarding houses or barracks located outside the town’s borders. “During the war, everyone needed ration stamps in order to get food,” explained the two elderly women seated across from me in the Miesbergkloster’s recreation room. “These laborers had their own stamps, and so they came also into the bakery shop. At times they would run out of stamps, and they were starving after all the work they were forced to do. Our mother had compassion on them... she pretended to cut stamps and then would give them bread for nothing in return. [An element of danger existed in performing this act, however, because Nazi officials meticulously examined the Gindele bakery’s records to ensure that they collected an appropriate number of stamps for the supplies they used].”

In April 1945, after enraged American soldiers discovered the mass grave haunting Schwarzenfeld’s borders, Maria Gindele’s generosity was unexpectedly repaid by one of the people least likely to defend a German citizen—a liberated Russian laborer who frequented her bakery. He stood in the doorway and blocked American soldiers barging into her bakery and homestead, intent upon fulfilling their orders: round up all German men in the town. “Here there are good people living,” the Russian assured them in broken German, “you don’t have to come in here.” His clothing and lean, rugged appearance convinced the astounded Americans, who departed and moved along methodically to neighboring homes.

Of all citizens living in the Third Reich, German women had the most leverage in successfully resisting a totalitarian state. “It was women who usually protested publicly,” an eyewitness from Regensburg remembered. “It was less dangerous for them than for men... especially for women with children. If they are arrested, who would look after their sons and daughters? Their husbands ran a greater risk—they were jailed or sent to the Russian front if they

were young enough, among other vexations.” One memorable example occurs in October 1941, when children throughout Bavaria returned to school after a three-month summer vacation and discovered that the shiny wooden crucifixes normally adorning their classroom walls were missing. In Regensburg, mothers marched the streets in protest. In Konnersreuth, the hometown of stigmatist Theresa Neumann, furious parents mobbed a teacher’s home during the night, which compelled an unnerved Kreisleiter in that district to send gendarmes. Gestapo agents arrived at Bodenmais with orders to subdue an irate band of farm women. Schwarzenfeld’s response was unique—the Gindele family’s maid, a brazen 18-year-old woman, penned a petition and circulated it around town, collecting signatures from Catholic mothers and then secreting the inflammatory document to the mayor’s office.

“I was betrayed and then taken to the police station, where I was interrogated for over four hours by two gendarmes,” Frau Friese described during a taped interview. “I was being called a *volksaufwiegler*, an agitator. They wanted me to confess that Herr Gindele or the Passionist Paters had put me up to it, but I only said, ‘I’m not going to stand here and do nothing while the Nazis take our religion away from us!’” To the devout young woman’s surprise, Fr. Viktor arrived at the station during the interrogation process to voice his support for her. “The Pater Provinzial helped by going there and saying, ‘She protested because of her faith; I know this young woman and her family.’” History records that the Bavarian Ministry of the Interior permitted schools to display crosses in towns where protest burned the hottest. In Schwarzenfeld the crosses would not return until after the war’s end, though both Fr. Viktor and Frau Friese walked free from the police station after her interrogation ended.

Of all the personal stories I’ve heard during the wartime era, the most enduring example of faith and human compassion occurs when Schwarzenfeld’s Catholics are confronted with the grim specter of the Holocaust. After Allied aircraft disabled their locomotive, SS guards begin a death march, forcing all remaining able-bodied Jewish prisoners to trudge down Schwarzenfeld’s Hauptstrasse (Main Street) toward their destination in Dachau. Reflecting on years of Sunday morning sermons and Good Friday devotions preached from the Passionists, Fr. Viktor’s flock connected suffering with Christ’s Passion, and as their stunned eyes beheld this horrific manifestation of human misery, they envisioned Jesus’ visage in each tormented face. “I didn’t know what they were,” Frau Friese remembered. “I thought they were criminals, and someone said KZ’lers (concentration camp inmates) but I didn’t know what that meant. I only knew they were

suffering. They kept motioning with cupped fingers to their mouths, and begging for food.” She darted to the Gindele bakery, where Maria Gindele flung herself into frantic fits of movement, gathering and slicing bread. Baskets in hand, Maria and Frau Friese dashed back to the street while the Gindele daughters scampered past them, offering water to passing prisoners. “We started handing out bread,” Frau Friese recalled, “and the Capo guard was very upset. ‘Can’t you see these people are starving?’ I demanded to him. ‘Why don’t you let them go?’ He argued with me, but I insisted. Then I handed him some bread and said, ‘Here, you eat first, and they will eat too!’” Crumpling under her dogged determination and his own hunger, the Capo permitted her to distribute her offerings.

Those Fateful 48 Hours

During the gray dawn hours of April 23, 1945, soldiers from the American 26th Infantry Division marched into Schwarzenfeld to replaced elements of the 11th Armored Division, which liberated the town only 12 hours before. Scouts investigating the area discovered gruesome remnants of the train station massacre that instigated the death march. Eyewitnesses remain uncertain as to why the Americans concluded that Schwarzenfeld’s population bore responsibility for the mass grave outside their town’s borders, though the desperate outcome is forever etched in history: German men between 16 and 60 were forced from their homes at gunpoint that morning and led into the dirt-paved streets, where troop carriers awaited them. “The mayor was told that the men were going to be transported to Deiselkühn, a neighboring village, where they would be shot,” one of the town’s carpenters told us during his 2005 interview. Amidst the pandemonium, Fr. Viktor marched to the Rathaus (town hall), where he debated with a war-hardened American commander determined to inflict reprisals on a “town full of Nazis.” I imagine the commander staring incredulously while my great granduncle paced the room, insisting that the Nazi government was the true enemy, not Schwarzenfeld’s citizens. Although a fervent few had invested faith in Nazism, the Catholic majority clung to their belief in the Cross. They recognized Hitler’s Thousand Year Reich on Earth as a fleeting mirage of glory compared to the eternal kingdom of Heaven, and despite the rabid propaganda dominating their newspapers and radios, faith kept their humanity intact.

In the war’s aftermath, history shows that Fr. Viktor’s dedication to voicing the German people’s plight lasted far beyond the 48-hour ordeal that saved Schwarzenfeld. In addition to writing copious letters to the American provisional government on behalf of ordinary citizens imprisoned in POW camps, he also composed letters to

senators and high-ranking officials in the United States—including Robert D. Murphy, the U.S. political advisor in Germany and a member of President Eisenhower’s cabinet. For years, I wondered what motivated my great granduncle’s obvious passion for defending the German people. Now I know. During our trip in 2005, I think Fr. Gregor expressed it best:

“As a priest and Religious, Father Viktor did not think in terms of friend or enemy,” he explained, reflecting on his predecessor’s holy courage. “As a German-American, and as a member of an international religious community, in which all treat each other as brothers, he was not marked by any feelings of nationalism. For him it was people who mattered, and their salvation, which for him originates in the Cross of Christ. He had come to implant this Cross and in doing so, had become a messenger of peace.”

For more information on Gary and Katherine’s research into Fr. Viktor’s story, visit their website at: www.viktorkoch.com

News from Fr. Rob Carbonneau in Chongqing, Sichuan, China

Following a week of orientation in Hong Kong, I arrived in Chongqing on the evening of Friday, August 23, 2007, at Sichuan International Studies University (SISU) and moved into my campus apartment. The next day I was told that on Monday, August 26 I was to start my weekly, English lecture class on International Relations "Hot Topics" to about 70 students. As of October 3, I have lectured on such topics as “September 11th,” “Terrorism and Anti-Terrorism,” “Is Pollution Slowly Killing Us?” and “An American’s View on the Iraq War.” On August 27 I began teaching another 90-minute class in English to about 150 students. This class focuses on US History and Culture and will also involve England, Australia, and Canada. To date, it has been an overview of American history to 1850. On October 9 I will explain the British Commonwealth system and have successive classes past and present understanding on England, Canada and Australia. Freshmen began to arrive on campus during the first two weeks in September. I then started teaching five spoken English classes once a week for 90-minutes. There are a total of about 140 students in those classes. So, it is a good work week. I also see a Chinese language tutor twice a week. In an upcoming newsletter I hope to write more about Chongqing. It is a massive metropolitan city. All in all, I have adapted well and feel the support from many people back home. I thank you all.



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526 Monastery Place
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It is the intention of the Commission to present material that will be both interesting and informative. We want to make better known the story of our Congregation and especially of our own Province; the Passionists, lay people and benefactors who made it, the immense labors they undertook in proclaiming the Gospel of Christ's Passion, and their successes and failures. We also want to look at the present situation of the Province through the eyes of Faith to try to ascertain what lessons, if any, history may be able to teach us as we try to understand our present moment and the future.

We hope to make this an **international** newsletter and so we welcome contributions from our readers of **any** Province. If you have any interesting stories or reflections or even questions that you are willing to share with us, we beg you to do so.

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526 Monastery Place
Union City, NJ 07087
Phone: 201-867-6400 Ext. 7033
Fax: 201-617-7011
e-mail: archives@cpprov.org

Fr. Robert E. Carbonneau, C.P.

526 Monastery Place
Union City, NJ 07087
Phone: 201-867-6400 Ext. 7032
Fax: 201-617-7011
e-mail: robcarb@cpprov.org