

***In Solitary Witness: The life and death of Franz Jägerstätter.* Gordon Zahn.
New York: Holy, Rinehart and Winston, 1964.**

[Note that I have Frank Sampson's copy.]

"I began to see in his actions – and, in particular, the many in which they were received and are still regarded by his fellow parishioners and the diocesan authorities – an occasion for a careful re-examination of the religious community's potential as a source of dissent with particular reference to modern war." [6]

St. Radegund

Jägerstätter's cousin, a Jehovah's Witness, was the only non-Catholic in the village; the two men "spent many hours in earnest discussion." [9]

The village Passion Play was last performed in 1930: "By a strange twist of irony, young Franz Jägerstätter had played the part of a soldier in the last season in which the Passion Play was given." [10]

The Parish's pastor "had been 'exiled' from the community in 1940 for being critical of the Nazi regime in one of his sermons." [11]

"... escapades which, as a young man, had earned him the reputation of being 'a wild one.'" [12]

The present church was built in 1420; evidence of a church as early as 1370. [13]

"It seems to have been little touched by the sweep of historical events and currents that have shaped our age." [14]

"In this remote village setting a simple peasant became a rebel" – Camus quote on the rebel's 'no' as also a 'yes.' [14]

"In this unlikely setting, an extraordinary act of rebellion took place... a repetition of an old story, the ever-recurring confrontation between Christ and Caesar." [15]

Hitler had been born only 30 km away, and spent his childhood in the Provincial capital, only slightly further away, also Eichmann's childhood home. [15]

"These men with their roots in the same soil: Hitler, Eichmann, and Jägerstätter." [15]

Re: Camus – "Perhaps it was precisely this, the justification of innocence, that Jägerstätter accomplished in his solitary witness." [16]

The Young Ruffian

Villager: "Few were willing even to entertain the possibility that he acted as a man in his position should." [18]

"... a 'new' man, who appeared after a sudden and complete change about the time of his wedding." [19]

“... it is the early Franz who is warmly regarded.” [19]

J. was an illegitimate child. [20]

Villagers’ “relaxed sexual morality.” [21]

His maternal grandmother’s “intense religiosity” may have influenced both Franz and his cousin (who became a Jehovah’s Witness) – both had together lived with her for awhile. [23]

Remembered by a classmate as “an avid reader” – his best school grades were in Reading and Religion. [24]

“... a little wilder than the general run of young men.” [25]

“... he brought the first motorcycle to the community.” [25]

In religion class “He is reported to have raised a question concerning the possibility of other children having been born to the mother of Jesus, and he proceeded to justify his inquiry by quoting some biblical texts.” [26]

“... ever-present readiness for a fight.” [27]

He had been ‘exiled’ from the town for an uncertain time, working in iron mines. [28]

It is likely because he had fathered an illegitimate child. [30]

In some of his writings, he speaks of a personal familiarity with “repentance and sorrow.” [34]

From a 1936 letter to his godchild: “For as long as we fear men more than God, we will never make the grade.” [34]

The ‘New’ Man

“... a sudden and total change” in Franz Jägerstätter at the time of his wedding. [36]

His wife was “exceptionally devout,” and the couple honeymooned in Rome. [37]

“... it is widely held in the community – that Jägerstätter’s actions were a sign of mental derangement.” [37]

It seems to Zahn that the ‘change’ occurred prior to marriage, which would explain his choice to marry “a woman of life mind and equal depth of moral commitment.” [38]

“The fact that he chose Rome for the visit at a time when such a trip was most unusual would testify to a very special interest in that place as the center of the religion to which his bride and he were so deeply devoted.” [39]

Understanding the change: His fathering a child and subsequent ‘exile’ might well have been the event which shocked the relatively mild youth into a personal conviction of sin and forced him into a totally new confrontation with Christianity as it affects moral obligations.” [39]

“The villagers’ memories of the changed man emphasize two major points: his intense and open religiosity and his thoroughgoing opposition to the Nazi regime.” [39]

Religiosity: singing hymns and the rosary while walking and working /acts of self-denial and discipline (e.g., no card playing). [40]

Daily communion and fasting until noon; distributing food to the poor. [41]

"... intense devotion and dedication to the Church" – "regular and frequent visits to a pilgrimage center in nearby Bavaria." [42]

"... became sexton sometime in 1940" – at about the time his pastor-friend had been removed.

The pastor's replacement was young and a newcomer: "The young vicar was not too well qualified to meet so unusual a challenge." – "...his intellectual capacity was unimpressive." [43]

J. "was not given to idle talk, nor would be speak ill of others, unless such opinions stemmed from his political opposition to the Nazis." [44]

He had "foresworn mundane pleasures." [44]

"Jägerstätter once told the priest that he ought to preach more about the sufferings to be endured in purgatory." [44]

J. chided the young priest, after a soldier's funeral, "for being so ceremonious (*festlich*) in lauding the virtues of the military life." [45]

He refused to accept the customary stipend from mourners. [46]

"... his total opposition to the Nazi regime and policies. It was an outspoken opposition, surprisingly so if one considers the penalties that could, and often did follow any expression of criticism or opposition." [46]

To "Heil, Hitler!" he responded "Pfui, Hitler!" [46]

J. had criticized/opposed the Nazis even before the Anschluss. [46]

He resigned from a local organization when it weakened its opposition to the Nazis. [46]

J. criticized the Bishops for their tragic mistake in acceding to the Nazis (to the point of praising them). [47]

J.: "I believe that what took place in the spring of 1938 was not much different from that Maundy Thursday nineteen-hundred years ago when the Jewish crowd was given a free choice between the innocent Savior and the criminal Barabbas." [47]

His 'nay' vote "marked the first step in a continuing series of refusals to co-operate that was to culminate in the action which cost him his life." [48]

J.'s godson had come to work on the farm, and J. kept him from any involvement in the Hitler youth. [48]

He refused to accept any money from the Nazis' family assistance program. [48]

This remained true even after a hailstorm destroyed crops. [49]

In a letter from prison: "Nature, he adds, has not taken much account of the misery that has descended upon mankind – 'even though I cannot see much of it, it seems to me, nevertheless, as if everything has grown and blossomed much lovelier this year.'" [52]

To his father-in-law: "It would be good if you don't drive my people too hard at their work so that they may have at least a little time left over for thinking – and for praying too." [52]

Common village perception "that Jägerstätter had become so self-centered in his religious and political thinking before his final decision that he had given insufficient thought to those who were dependent upon him." [53]

J.: "And if I had ten children, the greatest demand upon me is still the one I must make of myself." [53]

"To a man of unshakable faith and perfect abandonment to the will of God, the assurance of help and care for his family 'from the other side' makes complete sense. But such a pattern of behavior might well appear to be deluded and unconcerned, or even a callous disregard of family obligations and responsibilities, to most of Franz Jägerstätter's friends and neighbors." [54]

From Enns to Berlin

"The real beginning would have to be traced to that previous period of military training, during which the incompatibility between his opposition to the Nazi regime and his service in the Nazi forces first became clear to him." [56]

Priest in a neighboring town recalls J. giving him a detailed written statement of H.'s position – yet he advised J. to report for service. [58]

The Bishop of Linz recalled (after the war) a lengthy discussion with J. – "To no avail I spelled out for him the moral principles defining the degree of responsibility borne by citizens and private individuals for the acts of the civil authority." [58]

J.: "I believe it is better to sacrifice one's life right away than to place oneself in the grave danger of committing sin and then dying." [59]

He expresses compassion for men from his village who had died as soldiers at Stalingrad. [59]

His wife had resigned herself to his decision, but did not encourage it. [60]

"When the moment of rebellion came, Jägerstätter stood completely alone." [61]

March 1, 1943 – Enns induction center.

Conversation with other prisoners revealed to him stories of others who had resisted, from which he took some comfort. [62]

"He has become convinced that he can accomplish much more religious good in his cell than he could ever hope to do in the army." [62]

J.: "For if I did not have such a great horror of lies and double-dealing, I would not be sitting here." [63]

At “a low point in his morale bordering upon despair,” J. had expressed readiness to serve in the medical corps – but nothing is ever heard of that again. The day before he had received his first letter from home. [64]

J.: “As long as a man has an untroubled conscience and knows that he is not really a criminal, he can live at peace even in prison.” [65]

His letters often make connections between his situation and the “wider liturgical context” of the Church year. [65]

“... a flash of humor that catches one unaware” – he suggests trading places with his wife for a week so she could rest! [66]

J.: “... the important thing is to fear God more than man.” [66]

He asks his wife to send some edelweiss, as a young French cellmate wanted some to send his girlfriend as a remembrance.” [66]

J.: “As long as he can pray – and there is plenty of time for that – life is not in vain.” [67]

To his children: “... you must not lie.” [67]

Another “wry touch of humor” – though the food is good enough, “they have not locked us in here in order to fatten us up.” [68]

Letter of April 9: “... an open and unquestionably sincere expression of a husband’s devotion to his wife and the testimony of an abiding faith in a love that will continue despite separation and death.” [69]

“Some of the words are blotted, quite possibly by tears shed while the letter was being read – or, perhaps, even while it was being written.” [69]

His delight in having a book of the sermons of John Chrysostom to read. [71]

J.: “He who is not willing to suffer with and for Christ will also not share in His Resurrection.” [71]

Easter – J.: “And if we must also experience hard times today, we still should and can rejoice with the church regardless.” [72]

“... the knowledge that we never again need fear death.” [73]

J.: “The birds singing outside our windows... seem to know more of freedom and joy even though they are unreasoning animals than do we humans with our gift of intellect...” [74]

Priest in Linz recalls having visited J. and urging him to change his mind. [75]

“Franz had been clear and logical in his arguments, and all but unshakable in his commitment.” [76]

Two fellow prisoners recall J. constantly praying the rosary. [77-78]

“As a cellmate, he would share his last morsel of bread, saying he did not need anymore.” [79]

One of God’s Special Friends

J.: “Through all the things that have happened, I cannot bring myself to act in any other way.” [81]

J.: "Here I can make the best retreats." [84]

To his attorney's argument that millions of Catholics had found it possible to serve in the army, J. responded: "They have not been given the grace." [86]

The attorney also asked J. to "cite a single instance in which a bishop had called for resistance, and J. could not mention any. [86]

J. insisted "that this was the kind of moral judgment that ultimately has to be made by the individual conscience." [87]

Military court officials offer non-combatant service; J. refuses - "... at this moment the rebel in Jägerstätter appeared most clearly." [88]

The military officials seem to have been genuinely moved by J.: "It is conceivable that Jägerstätter reached them as they were unable to reach him." [89]

In a personal visit arranged by his attorney, J.'s wife and pastor "tried to prevail upon him to change his mind." [94]

J.: "These few words are being set down here as they come from my mind and my heart. And if I must write them with my hands in chains, I find that much better than if my will were in chains." [97]

J.: "For us men there are only two possibilities in this world: either we become ever better or ever worse; there is simply no such thing as standing still." [98]

J.: "For love will conquer and will endure for all eternity." [99]

J.: "It must surely have been hard for our dear Saviour to bring such pain upon His dear Mother through His death." [100]

J.: "... not everything which this world considers a crime is a crime in the eyes of God." [101]

"It is much better to pray for everyone than to pass judgment upon them, for God desires that all become blessed." [101]

J.: "Even if I had ten children, the greatest demand upon me would still be the one I must make of myself... I can say from my own experience how painful life is when we live like halfway Christians, that is more like vegetating than living." [102]

J. was a Third Order Franciscan. [104]

J.: "the heart of Jesus, the heart of Mary, and my heart are one, united for time and eternity." [104]

A Train to Hell

Many in his village cite the influence of J.'s cousin, a *Bibelforscher* (Jehovah's Witness). This is unlikely, as J. continually tried to convert this cousin to Catholicism, and this cousin accepted induction. [108]

This cousin's ex-wife believed that J. had become "'too one-sided' on the issue of the Fifth Commandment and its application." J. was actually trying to convince his cousin; he "always insisted that nothing less than total refusal was required." [109]

Zahn writes of the “mutual interpenetration” of the ‘new J.’s (a) intense religiosity and (b) equally intense political opposition to the Nazis. [110]

Re: J.’s *Commentaries*: “... the essential clarity of reasoning and the depth of spiritual insight are commitment found in these writings.” [110]

Simple style of the *Commentaries*: “The exact grammarians, the people who could spell faultlessly, the master of dazzling syllogistic argument, somehow found it possible, in most cases, to come to terms with and give their support (or at least their acquiescence) to one of history’s most inhuman and unjust regimes. This simple, untutored peasant, almost alone, with all his faults of style, was able to recognize both the evil of the day and the responsibilities it placed upon him as a believing Christian – and to accept those responsibilities though they led to the grave.” [111]

In 1938, J. had a dream of a train going to hell. [111-112]

J.: “I believe the German people were never so deeply involved in the works of Christian charity or so ready to contribute as they are today to the Nazis.” [112]

J.: “... should I be a National Socialist – or a Catholic?” [113]

Regarding his dream: “I would like to call out to everyone who is riding on this train: ‘Jump out.’” [113]

J.: “Let us not on this account cast stones at our bishops or priests. They, too, are men like us, made of flesh and blood, and can weaken.” [114]

J.: “... the situation in which we Christians of Germany find ourselves today is much more desperate and bewildering than that faced by the Christians of the early centuries in the time of their bloodiest persecution.” [114]

“... the Nazis will do everything they can to win a rebel over to their Folk Community.” [116]

“But Christ, too, demands a public confession of our faith, just as the Fuhrer, Adolph Hitler, does from his followers.” [117]

“England and America are not much better, though perhaps more civilized and at the moment not so crude as the Russians.” [117]

A lengthy discourse on abortion and contraception follow as evidence of the decline of German culture. [117]

“In an ironic view he notes that throughout history, when rulers have invaded other lands they have usually done so to take something from the conquered lands, not to give them something.” [119]

J.: “If we were merely fighting Bolshevism, would other things like iron, oil wells, or good grain lands have become such important considerations?” [119]

“... our crooked game.” [120]

J.: The evil man is “just as much my brother as the man who is good.” [121]

J.: “What must people of other faiths think of us and our faith if it means so little to us?” [121]

J.: “but as long as we live in this world, I believe it is never too late to save ourselves and, perhaps, some other souls for Christ.” In Zahn’s words, “the sharpest summation of his declaration of personal rebellion.” [123]

J.: “... the thoughtless race goes on, always closer to eternity.” [123]

J.: “If road signs were ever placed so loosely in the earth that every wind could break them off or blow them about, would anyone who did not know the road be able to find his way?” [124]

Zahn sees “at least a predisposition to a pacifist commitment.” [130]

“Aside from the Bible itself, it seems that the principal source of Jägerstätter’s religious thought is to be found in the lives and teachings of the saints.” [132]

The Martyr and His Village

Of the villagers, Mrs. Jägerstätter recalled “that very few went out of their way to express their sympathy or to offer their assistance at this trying time; most of them, she felt, tended to be fearful that they might fall under suspicion or otherwise get into trouble for doing so.” [139]

“It was generally taken as a self-evident fact that his political and religious fanaticism had finally combined to unsettle him mentally, so much so that he was no longer able to put things in their proper order of priority...” [141]

Younger residents of the village evidence little knowledge or, or interest in, J. [148-150]

“... that a relatively uneducated man from an isolated rural village could have such profound insights into the political and spiritual implications of his time...” [159]

The Martyr and His Church

Regarding Church attitude toward J.: “... intimations of attitudes we may expect in the future when Caesar and Christ will once again make conflicting demands upon the loyal obedience of the Christian citizen.” [161]

“[Fr.] Kreuzberg was impressed by the way Jägerstätter’s face lighted up when he heard that a priest had taken a similar stand.” [162]

Of the church authorities, “none had been able or willing to tell him that *he was right*.” [162]

“... He was a solitary witness.” [162]

J.’s was “a stand against his fellow-Catholics and their spiritual leaders.” [162]

The Bishop of Linz, refusing to publish an article on J., sarcastically asks: “... are the greater heroes the *Bibelforschers* and Adventists who, in their ‘consistency,’ preferred to die in concentration camps rather than bear arms?” [166]

Zahn: “... my astonishment that the diocesan paper had ignored the case so completely.” [168]

“A generation has been lost in which the immediacy and the saliency of the lesson to be learned from this case have faded.” [171]

“... if it is true that the wars were unjust, Jägerstätter’s decision, however he may have come to it, was the morally correct one – and all the other people, still speaking in the context of *objective* validity, acted in a manner which could quite properly be described as at least a material violation of the Fifth Commandment.” [171]

“... be believed suffering, even martyrdom, was an essential and expected part of the Christian heritage.” [172]

“... his stand departed from the pattern prevailing within Christianity in general.” [172]

“... the extent to which the Christian is, or may be, ‘called’ to social dissent or disobedience when conformity would involve behavior considered morally questionable.” [172]

When Church attention turns from questions of individual morality to social, “the emphasis shifts abruptly.” [172]

“... repeated references to priests and seminarians who had accepted military service.” [173]

“the harsh truth is that Jägerstätter had chosen to take his stand at a time and in a place where the religious community itself had abandoned all pretensions to the traditions of protest and prophecy that had marked its earlier history.” [173]

“Shepherds and flock alike had succumbed so thoroughly to the temptations of conformism and accommodation – albeit in the guise of ‘prudence’ exaggerated to a point where the virtue of fortitude was all but forgotten – that they had lost all sense of identity and purpose.” [173]

For the Christian in general today: “Not only has his religious community foresworn the role of prophecy, but it seems at times to deny the legitimacy and efficacy of martyrdom as well.” [174]

Statement (1958) of the American hierarchy: Prudence “is a virtue – that is, an energy – of commitment and effectiveness arising from a conviction about ends in view.”

“... the same pattern of acquiescence or silence whenever the *institutional* ‘good of the Church’ seemed to be involved emerges.” [175]

“... theological loopholes.” [175]

One bishop dismissed priests in Dachau as “martyrs to their own stupidity.” [175]

The “community of the saints” provided J. with what was lacking in his concrete experience of the Church. [176]

“For the very fact that none would notice or be likely to be affected by what he did serves to reduce the issue to the individual and his conscience in silent and inner confrontation with God.” [178]

“He stood alone – and he knew there was nothing else for him to do but bear his solitary witness.” [179]

The Martyr as Rebel: A Sociological Summary

Zahn’s sociological framework: social control and social deviance. [180]

"A sociologist who insists upon a voluntarist approach to human behavior must, nevertheless, address himself to the indisputable facts of consistent, and to a degree, predictable, regularities in the behavior of members of a given society." [181]

Controls: formal / informal external / internal

Sociological treatment of "outsiders" normally focuses on sociological problems. But: "The rebel, the martyr, the saint, *as social types*, represent forms of social deviance that should be perhaps even more challenging to the student of social behavior."

Peter Viereck's book, *The Unadjusted Man*: "... a new liberator... a bad mixer... scandalously devoid of 'education for citizenship'... the final irreducible pebble that sabotages the omnipotence of even the smoothest-running machine." [182]

Conscientious objection as social deviance. [183]

"*Geschlossenheit* – the feeling of enclosedness and mutuality of the isolated rural community" both provided something of a buffer against remote state authority and a reinforcement of support for the war effort. [184]

"... the ever-present awareness that the temptation to save himself would also be with him until the last moment." [185]

All external controls favored conformity; there was a tension of internal controls between conformism and non-conformism. [185]

Camus separated the "world of the sacred" and the "world of rebellion" – this separation cannot understand J. [186]

J. "never lost sight of the fact that he was acting in *history*, and that his actions were responsive to the imperatives of history almost as much as to the imperatives of his faith." [188]

"in [Robert] Merton's terms, [J.] was appealing to a past reference group and 'reactivating' a forgotten set of values, standards, and practices – or, in another sense, one might hold that his action was keyed to a *future* reference group in that he framed his aspirations in terms of enjoying eternal blessedness in the life of the hereafter." [193]

"At the very least [J.'s story] should inspire some new consideration of the adequacy of the traditional theory of the just war which proved so flexible that it could permit a bishop to decide *after the war* that this man was in 'erroneous' conscience and the others who fought and died (and killed) did so 'in the light of a clear and correct conscience.'" [193]

"... this solitary witness of a simply peasant, might serve the religious community as a standard by which to measure the distance and the direction in which it has moved – and is still moving." [195]

The role of the Church "has already assumed with respect to the preparation for possible future wars with the potentially immoral weapons and strategies by which they will be fought." [195-196]

"Instead of rising in horrified protest when the suggestion is made that religion is (or threatens to become) a divisive force in a pluralistic society, the religious community might better recognize that

there are likely to be many occasions when it *must* be such a divisive force, as it has been in ages past when prophets came forth to denounce an enemy of sinful social order and to inspire martyrs to refuse to conform to the demands of that social order.” [196]

In Troeltsch’s category, the Church “will almost always perform as a control agency over its members in such a way that it will serve as an instrument of adjustment and accommodation to the demands of the greater society.” [198]

The Catholic community “did face a peculiar challenge to recognize and develop its potential as a source of dissent and deviance at that more significant level of the individual and his actions.” [201]

“The most immediate need, if the attempt is to be made, is to *reaffirm* and *develop* the individual’s capacity for making a deliberate and rational choice.” [201]

J.: “For what purpose, then, did God endow all men with reason and free will if, as so many also say, the individual is not qualified to judge whether this war started by Germany is just or unjust?” [202]

Regarding nuclear weapons: “No matter how brilliantly the moral-theologians-cum-strategists may perform in charting the course of hypothetical fleets at sea or armies locked in combat in remote and uninhabited desert reaches, the weapons they so studiously avoid condemning *in toto* are being built and designed for the same criminal use that once earned a Herod the ignominy that has not diminished in the course of two millennia.” [203]

Life in a democracy heightens the responsibility of citizens. [203]

Need for Catholic resistance and rebellion. [203]