

4-8-2010

Catholic Student Resistance in Nazi Germany: Willi Graf of the White Rose (poster session)

Stephani Richards-Wilson
Marquette University, srichards@gwc.aurora.edu



CATHOLIC STUDENT RESISTANCE IN NAZI GERMANY

WILLI GRAF OF THE WHITE ROSE

Dr. Stephani Richards-Wilson, Assistant Dean, Klingler College of Arts and Sciences

International Faculty Research Poster Session, Marquette University, April 8, 2010

Upper Left:

Research Question: How does one learn to face down evil and pass that spirit on to others?

Wilhelm Joseph Graf was born January 2, 1918 and grew up in an apolitical, devout, Catholic family in Saarbrücken, Germany. As a grade-schooler, he served as an altar boy and regularly attended mass.

In 1929, shortly after he entered secondary school, Willi Graf joined a Catholic boy's group called *Bund Neudeutschland* (New Germany), which the Nazis banned in 1936. Graf refused to join the Hitler Youth, required of all boys 10 years old and older, despite being threatened from being withheld to take his qualifying exams for university admission.

At age 16, Graf joined *Grauer Orden* (Grey Order), a young men's Christian group formed at Easter in 1934, consisting of boys from 12 to 25 years old primarily from the middle-class and western and southern Germany. They went on retreats and took short camping trips within and outside of Germany – all considered illegal activities by the Nazis. Members read theological works by Romano Guardini, the leading figure in the German liturgical revival between the two world wars, and they often sang religious hymns that reminded them of God's grace and mercy.

In February 1937, Graf received his university-entrance diploma. In April, he began his mandatory 6-month *Reichsarbeitsdienst* (paramilitary labor service duty) in Dillingen/Saar. This consisted of agricultural work.

In November 1937, Graf began medical studies at the University of Bonn. He continued there until September 1939. Graf was a member of the Red Cross from 1938 until his death in 1943.

In January 1938, Graf first experienced the Gestapo and prison. He was arrested with 17 others for his membership in the Grey Order. Graf was held in custody for two weeks. His case was dropped in May 1938 due to an amnesty after the Reich annexed Austria in March.

Graf was drafted in January 1940 and served as a *Sanitätssoldat* (medic) in the German army. He saw action in Southern France, Belgium, the Balkans, and Poland, witnessing wartime suffering and brutality first-hand. In June 1941, he was transferred to the Soviet front. His experiences in Poland and the former Soviet Union in particular played a major role in motivating him to join the resistance in 1942. In February 1942, he wrote his sister who noted his reaction to the atrocities he had witnessed at the hands of the Germans – “*Nicht: Es muss etwas geschehen, sondern: Ich muss etwas tun.*” (“Not: Something must be done, on the contrary: I must do something.”)

In April 1942, Graf was given leave from the front and was allowed to continue his medical studies as a member of the 2nd Munich Student Company at Ludwig-Maximilian University. From July until the end of October of the same year, however, Graf and others that would eventually form the student resistance group called the White Rose, were transferred to the Eastern front for a field internship. Upon his return to Munich in the fall of 1942, Graf became an active member of the White Rose and determined opponent of the Third Reich, costing him his life one year later.

From fall 1942 until February 1943, Graf was enrolled at the university. He attended seminars, clinics, Bach choir, mass, and fencing practice, in addition to reading over 40 books in this year alone. He liked cigars, long-distance running, nature and animals, and drinking wine and schnapps with his friends. At night he met with other members of the White Rose to compose, mail, and distribute mass quantities of leaflets that called for passive resistance and removal of the Nazi regime. During these months and at great risk to their safety, they produced six leaflets and anonymously distributed thousands of copies. This was difficult, time-consuming, labor-intensive, and dangerous work. The White Rose, along with the support of one of their professors, often repeated Psalm 90 individually or as a group. Members were of various faith traditions.

During his Christmas holidays in 1942-43 and at his own expense, Graf traveled to Bonn, Ulm, Cologne, Saarbrücken, and Freiburg for the purpose of seeking support from among his old friends to participate in the distribution of their leaflets. Only four were willing to help.

In February 1943, Graf helped other White Rose members write freedom slogans on Munich’s city walls at night.

On February 18, 1943, Graf was arrested for his role in the White Rose after other members were caught and arrested the same day for distributing leaflets at the university. In accordance with the Nazi practice of *Sippenhaft*, the Gestapo rounded up his family as well. His sister spent four months in prison and his parents spent four weeks, causing him extreme anguish fearing they could be deported to a concentration camp.

On April 19, 1943, Willi Graf, along with other members of the White Rose, was condemned to death for high treason and spent the next few months in prison. The Gestapo tried to elicit the names of friends involved with the White Rose, but Graf held out and never betrayed their confidence, thereby saving their lives. Graf followed the dictates of his conscience and Catholic faith. Since the age of 15, he sought guidance from his favorite bible verse: "*Seid Gefolgschaft in der Tat, nicht nur im Hören des Wortes*" (Jak. 1, 22). ("Be doers of the word and not hearers only, deluding yourselves." The Letter of James 1:22)

On October 12, 1943, Willi Graf was beheaded at age 25 in Munich-Stadelheim prison. His execution took 1 minute 11 seconds from the time he was escorted from his prison cell to the time the blade fell. His parents officially learned of his death when a letter they had written to him was returned and marked "deceased."

On November 4, 1946, and at the request of his father, Graf's remains were moved from Munich to the old St. Johann cemetery in Saarbrücken. On October 12, 2003, Willi Graf was posthumously made an honorary citizen of Saarbrücken, Germany.

Eight schools and several streets in Germany are named after Willi Graf of the White Rose.

My research: In his last letter to his younger sister, Graf asked her to carry on what the White Rose had begun. The events leading to Graf's participation in the White Rose and his eventual death are well documented. The more personal aspects of his life, however, remain unexplored whether in German or English. My research and second dissertation focus on Graf's formation in the Catholic youth movement, his personal development as reflected in the numerous works he read and the context in which he read them, and the factors that led him to move beyond passive criticism of the Nazi regime to risking his life not only for his own faith, but for that of others.

"Jeder Einzelne trägt die ganze Verantwortung."
"Every individual bears full responsibility." – Willi Graf







