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## FRANZ JÄGERSTÄTTER

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At 4pm on August 9th, 1943, a 37 year-old Austrian farmer was taken from his cell in Berlin's Brandenburg prison, marched in chains to a desk where his death sentence was again read out, pushed into another room where the executioner was waiting and beheaded. His name was Franz Jägerstätter and that should have been the end of the story. And the end it was, for a long time - at least for the rest of the world. However, this was certainly not true for his widow, his three young daughters and for the villagers of St. Radegund, a tiny place just a few hundred yards from the German boarder.

Franz grew up in St. Radegund and was well known as a wild youth. He introduced the first motorbike to the village, took part in not a few brawls with youngsters from other villages, and is supposed to have fathered an illegitimate child.

His life began to change with marriage in 1937. His wife, pious and quiet, certainly influenced Franz, but his developing interest in the roots of his religion came also from his own reading and thinking. His strong vocal opposition to Hitler's take-over of Austria in 1938 was well remembered.

### Conscription

He was conscripted on June 17th, 1940 but after basic training was sent back to

his village on April 9th, 1941 to carry on with farm work.

At that time he did not refuse military service, though he told his wife that the Nazi uniform made him *feel dirty*". His recall came in February 1943 as Hitler was beginning to scrape the manpower barrel.

*We need no rifles or pistols for our battle, but instead spiritual weapons - and the foremost of these is prayer."*

By then Franz' views had been firmly formed. He now took his Christianity very seriously indeed, had become a church sacristan and was very friendly with his parish priest, a first-world war hero who shared his views and advised him to

refuse military service. Jägerstätter's convictions about the wickedness of the war did not waver. It was one in which Christians should play no part. Without any moral or legal right, the Nazis were invading other countries.

### Conscientious objection?

There is no evidence that Jägerstätter ever became an absolute pacifist. His was a judgment on the facts of a particular regime and a particular war. He took himself off to the Bishop of Linz to ask for advice and was told to forget his objections and to do his duty. Who was he to know all the facts **and** anyway this was a war against Bolshevism?



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*"I am convinced that it is still best that I speak the truth even though it costs me my life. For you will not find it written in any of the commandments of God or of the Church that a man is obliged under pain of sin to take an oath committing him to obey what might be*

*commanded of him by his secular ruler. We need no rifles or pistols for our battle, but instead spiritual weapons - and the foremost of these is prayer"*

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The bishop's advice reflected also the legal situation. There was no provision for conscientious objection.

As Franz walked out of his village that February, heading for the recruiting depot at Enns, a friend shouted: "God go with you Franz". The answer came back quietly: "You will see no more of me".

His court martial took place on July 14th, 1943, and even then renewed efforts were made, in a quite humane way, to get him to change his mind. There is now conflict of evidence as to whether or not he was willing to serve in a non-combatant capacity. The trial record, recently discovered in Prague, says that he was, but there is nothing to support this in his own letters and, if it were true, then the sentence of death is not easily explained.

Twenty years after his death, Franz Jägerstätter's story began to spread around the world with dramatic effect. It was related at the Vatican Council by Archbishop Thomas Roberts, SJ, and must have played some part in getting the Catholic Church to change its official attitude to conscientious objection. Reaction in Austria was initially not very warm. The Church authorities made efforts to suppress the story. In St. Radegund itself the attempt to put Franz' name on the war memorial met with strong opposition, though it got there in the end with the phrase "following his conscience" added.

*"My dearest, beloved wife and all my children, - he wrote on the morning of his execution - ... many actually believe quite simply that things have to be the way they are. If this should happen to mean that they are obliged to commit injustice then they believe that others are responsible... For this reason I am convinced that it is still best that I speak the truth even if it costs my life... these few words are being set down here as they come from my mind and heart. And if I must write them with my hands in chains, I find that much better than if my will were in chains."*

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By Bruce Kent, taken from an article that appeared in the Guardian in July 1991.

Read:

*Against the Stream: Franz Jägerstätter*  
Pax Christi.  
Price £1.50

*Franz Jägerstätter: An International Symbol of Conscience* Pax Christi International.  
Price £1.50

Both available from Pax Christi