

# JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

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Jehovah's Witnesses endured intense persecution under the Nazi regime. Actions against the religious group and its individual members spanned the Nazi years 1933 to 1945. Unlike Jews and Sinti and Roma ("Gypsies"), persecuted and killed by virtue of their birth, Jehovah's Witnesses had the opportunity to escape persecution and personal harm by renouncing their religious beliefs. The courage the vast majority displayed in refusing to do so, in the face of torture, maltreatment in concentration camps, and sometimes execution, won them the respect of many contemporaries.



Nordrhein-Westfälisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Düsseldorf. (Top) RW 58-67759 (Bottom) RW 58-66519.

## JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES: VICTIMS OF THE NAZI ERA

Founded in the United States in the 1870s, the Jehovah's Witnesses organization sent missionaries to Germany to seek converts in the 1890s. By the early 1930s, only 20,000 (of a total population of 65 million) Germans were Jehovah's Witnesses, usually known at the time as "International Bible Students."

Even before 1933, despite their small numbers, door-to-door preaching and the identification of Jehovah's Witnesses as heretics by the mainstream Protestant and Catholic churches made them few friends. Individual German states and local authorities periodically sought to limit the group's proselytizing activities with charges of illegal peddling. There

were also outright bans on Jehovah's Witnesses' religious literature, which included the booklets *The Watch Tower* and *The Golden Age*. The courts, by contrast, often ruled in favor of the religious minority. Meanwhile, in the early 1930s, Nazi brownshirted storm troopers, acting outside the law, broke up Bible study meetings and beat up individual Witnesses.

After the Nazis came to power, persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses intensified. Small as the movement was, it offered, in scholar Christine King's words, a "rival ideology" and "rival center of loyalty" to the Nazi movement. Although honest and as law-abiding as their religious beliefs allowed,

*Mug shot of Else Woieziek, a Jehovah's Witness sentenced to death and executed in 1944. Düsseldorf, Germany, 1937–38.*

*Mug shot of Heinrich Heine, a shop assistant from Neuss, Germany. He was placed in protective custody for participating in illegal activities as a Jehovah's Witness. Düsseldorf, Germany, January 8, 1937.*

Jehovah's Witnesses saw themselves as citizens of Jehovah's Kingdom; they refused to swear allegiance to any worldly government. They were not pacifists, but as soldiers in Jehovah's army, they would not bear arms for any nation.

Jehovah's Witnesses, in Germany as in the United States, had refused to fight in World War I. This stance contributed to hostility against them in a Germany still wounded by defeat in that war and fervently nationalistic, attempting to reclaim its previous world stature. In Nazi Germany, Jehovah's Witnesses refused to raise their arms in the "Heil, Hitler!" salute; they did not vote in elections; they would not join the army or the German Labor Front (a Nazi affiliate, which all salaried employees were required to join after 1934).

Jehovah's Witnesses were denounced for their international and American ties, the apparent revolutionary tone of their millennialism (belief in the peaceful 1,000-year heavenly rule over the earth by Christ, preceded by the battle of Armageddon), and their supposed connections to Judaism, including a reliance on parts of the Bible embodying Jewish scripture (the Christian "Old Testament"). Many of these charges were brought against more than 40 other banned religious groups, but none of these were persecuted to the same degree. The crucial difference was the intensity Witnesses demonstrated in refusing to give ultimate loyalty or obedience to the state.

In April 1933, four months after Hitler became Chancellor, Jehovah's Witnesses were banned in Bavaria and by the summer



*In the nearly 125 years since its beginnings in the United States, the Jehovah's Witnesses organization has gained adherents in over 200 nations.*

## WHO ARE JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES?

In 1872, Charles Taze Russell (1852–1916), the second son of devout Presbyterian parents, founded the International Bible Students Association in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. It was his purpose, through intense Biblical study, to uncover God's word, which had been "buried under a morass of pagan teachings" mistakenly adopted by mainstream Christian churches over the centuries.

In 1931, the Association under Russell's successor, Joseph Franklin Rutherford (1869–1942), changed its name to Jehovah's Witnesses. Invoking the prophet Isaiah (43:12) — "You are my witnesses, and I am God" — adherents have dedicated themselves to bearing witness to Jehovah's name and His Kingdom.

The Jehovah's Witnesses anticipate the establishment of an earthly paradise under God's Kingdom. They believe this Kingdom will emerge following Armageddon — a final battle between the forces of good and evil. The Witnesses use the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, as the main text for their beliefs. While they do not believe that Jesus is God, they consider Christ the chief agent for his father, who is God.

The Witnesses meet in churches called Kingdom Halls. Most members of local congregations are "publishers" expected to spend as much time as circumstances permit in door-to-door preaching. The Jehovah's Witnesses publish books, tracts, recordings, and periodicals, including *The Watchtower* and *Awake*, which appear in more than 100 languages and over 200 nations. Three corporations direct the activities of the Witnesses: the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania and the Brooklyn-based Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, Inc. of New York and the International Bible Students Association. According to their figures, nearly five million "publishers" are presently active in 69,558 congregations in 229 countries.

## JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES' STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLES (1934)

To the Officials of the Government:

The Word of Jehovah God, as set out in the Holy Bible, is the supreme law, and to us it is our sole guide for the reason that we have devoted ourselves to God and are true and sincere followers of Christ Jesus.

During the past year, and contrary to God's law and in violation of our rights, you have forbidden us as Jehovah's Witnesses to meet together to study God's Word and worship and serve Him. In His Word he commands us that we shall not forsake the assembling of ourselves together. (Hebrews 10:25) To us Jehovah commands: 'Ye are my witnesses that I am God. Go and tell the people my message.' (Isaiah 43:10, 12; Isaiah 6:9; Matthew 24:14) There is a direct conflict between your law and God's law, and, following the lead of the faithful apostles, 'we ought to obey God rather than men,' and this we will do. (Acts 5:29) Therefore this is to advise you that at any cost we will obey God's commandments, will meet together for the study of His Word, and will worship and serve Him as He has commanded. If your government or officers do violence to us because we are obeying God, then our blood will be upon you and you will answer to Almighty God.

We have no interest in political affairs, but are wholly devoted to God's Kingdom under Christ His King. We will do no injury or harm to anyone. We would delight to dwell in peace and do good to all men as we have opportunity, but, since your government and its officers continue in your attempt to force us to disobey the highest law of the universe, we are compelled to now give you notice that we will, by His Grace, obey Jehovah God and fully trust Him to deliver us from all oppression and oppressors.

*Reprinted and translated in Jehovah's Witnesses: Proclaimers of God's Kingdom (New York: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1993), p. 694.*

*The letter (left), dated October 7, 1934, was sent to the German government by every congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses in Germany. This declaration of political neutrality failed to convince the Nazi regime that the Witnesses were harmless.*

in most of Germany. Twice during 1933, police occupied the Witnesses' offices and their printing site in Magdeburg and confiscated religious literature. Witnesses defied Nazi prohibitions by continuing to meet and distribute their literature often covertly. Copies were made from booklets smuggled in mainly from Switzerland.

Initially, Jehovah's Witnesses attempted to fend off Nazi attacks by issuing a letter to the government in October 1934, explaining their religious beliefs and political neutrality. This declaration failed to convince the Nazi regime of the group's harmlessness. For defying the ban on their activities, many Witnesses were arrested and sent to prisons and concentration camps. They lost their jobs as civil servants or employees in

private industry and their unemployment, social welfare, and pension benefits.

From 1935 onward, Jehovah's Witnesses faced a Nazi campaign of nearly total persecution. On April 1, 1935, the group was banned nationally by law. The same year, Germany reintroduced compulsory military service. For refusing to be drafted or perform war-related work, and continuing to meet, Jehovah's Witnesses were arrested and incarcerated in prisons and concentration camps. In 1936 some 400 Jehovah's Witnesses were imprisoned at Sachsenhausen concentration camp.

In 1936 a special unit of the Gestapo (Secret State Police) began compiling a registry of all persons believed to be Jehovah's Witnesses, and agents infiltrated Bible study

# J E H O V A H ' S W I T N E S S E S ~ V I C T I M S O F T H E N A Z I E R A ~ 1 9 3 3 - 1 9 4 5

## LAST LETTER OF WOLFGANG KUSSEROW

*On March 28, 1942, Wolfgang Kusserow, a twenty-year-old Jehovah's Witness, was executed for refusing military service. The day before his death he wrote his family a last letter, translated here.*

Brandenburg, March 27, 1942

My dear Parents, and my dear brothers and sisters!

One more time I am given the opportunity to write you. Well, now I, your third son and brother, shall leave you tomorrow early in the morning. Be not sad, the time will come when we shall all be together again. Those who will sow with tears, will reap with joy. "Those sowing seed with tears will reap even with a joyful cry."

How great the joy will be, when we see all of us again, although it is not easy now to overcome all this, but through belief and hope in the King and His Kingdom we conquer the worst. "For I am convinced that neither death nor life nor angels nor governments nor things now here nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth nor any other creation will be able to separate us from God's love that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8: 38-39).

So we confidently look forward to the future.

Dear Papa, I am sorry that I was not allowed to visit you early in December. Exactly one year ago from tomorrow I saw you and Hildegard for the last time. In the meantime I have visited Lenchen. It was a special joy for me to see Mummy once again. Well, dear Mummy, Annemarie read me your dear letter during her visit... It is fine that you are busy in the baking factory (prison), so you are at least in a warm room and you have something to eat. Lenchen is now in the concentration camp.

Thus we are all separated, but everybody is steady. Yes we shall be rewarded for all of this. Read this in James 1:12: "Happy is the man who keeps on enduring trials, because on becoming approved he will receive the crown of life, which Jehovah promised to those who continue loving Him."

Dear Annemarie, once more special thanks to you for all your endeavors. May this our Lord reward you. I have you all constantly in

mind. That was a life, when we were all at home together! — And suddenly separated!

Well Satan knows that his time is short. Therefore, he tries with all his power to lead astray from God men of good will, but he will have no success. We know that our faith will be victorious.

In this faith and this conviction I leave you.

A last greeting from this old world in the hope of seeing you again soon in a New World.

Your son and brother (signed) Wolfgang



*Wolfgang Kusserow, standing third from the left in the last portrait taken of the family, was one of eleven children of Frans and Hilda Kusserow, devout Jehovah's Witnesses.*



*This old Opel car was used by the Kusserows when they traveled house to house handing out religious tracts. The painted sign on the side of their house in Bad Lippspringe, Germany, reads "Lesen Sie das Goldene Zeitalter" ("read The Golden Age").*

meetings. By 1939, an estimated 6,000 Witnesses (including those from incorporated Austria and Czechoslovakia) were detained in prisons or camps. Some Witnesses were tortured by police in attempts to make them sign a declaration renouncing their faith, but few capitulated.

In response to Nazi efforts to destroy them, the worldwide Jehovah's Witness organization became a center of spiritual resistance against the Nazis. An international convention of Witnesses, held in Lucerne, Switzerland, in September 1936, issued a resolution condemning the entire Nazi regime. In this text and other literature brought into Germany, writers broadly indicted the Third Reich. Articles strongly denounced the persecution of German Jews, Nazi "savagery"

toward Communists, the remilitarization of Germany, the Nazification of schools and universities, Nazi propaganda, and the regime's assault on mainstream churches.

The children of Jehovah's Witnesses also suffered. In classrooms, teachers ridiculed children who refused to give the "Heil, Hitler!" salute or sing patriotic songs. Classmates shunned and beat up young Witnesses. Principals expelled them from schools. Families were broken up as authorities took children away from their parents and sent them to reform schools, orphanages, or private homes, to be brought up as Nazis.

After 1939 most active Jehovah's Witnesses were incarcerated in prisons or concentration camps. Some had fled Germany. In the camps, all prisoners

*Jehovah's Witnesses incarcerated in prisons and concentration camps were given the opportunity to be freed, if they signed the statement (right) renouncing their beliefs. Few did so, even when beaten or tortured by their guards.*

## DECLARATION RENOUNCING BELIEFS

Concentration camp .....  
 Department II

### DECLARATION

I, the .....  
 born on .....  
 in .....  
 herewith make the following declaration:

1. I have come to know that the International Bible Students Association is proclaiming erroneous teachings and under the cloak of religion follows hostile purposes against the State.
2. I therefore left the organization entirely and made myself absolutely free from the teachings of this sect.
3. I herewith give assurance that I will never again take any part in the activity of the International Bible Students Association. Any persons approaching me with the teaching of the Bible Students, or who in any manner reveal their connections with them, I will denounce immediately. All literature from the Bible Students that should be sent to my address I will at once deliver to the nearest police station.
4. I will in the future esteem the laws of the State, especially in the event of war will I, with weapon in hand, defend the fatherland, and join in every way the community of the people.
5. I have been informed that I will at once be taken again into protective custody if I should act against the declaration given today.

....., Dated .....  
 ..... Signature

*Reprinted and translated in Jehovah's Witnesses: Proclaimers of God's Kingdom (New York: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc., 1993), p. 661.*



*Helene Gotthold with her two children, Gerd and Gisela, in 1936. Arrested many times for defying the Nazi ban on Jehovah's Witness activities, Helene was convicted, condemned to death, and beheaded on December 8, 1944, in Berlin. Gerd and Gisela survived.*

Gift of Martin Tillmanns, USHMM.

wore markings of various shapes and colors so that guards and camp officers could identify them by category. Witnesses were marked by purple triangular patches. Even in the camps, they continued to meet, pray, and make converts. In Buchenwald concentration camp, they set up an underground printing press and distributed religious tracts.

Conditions in Nazi camps were generally harsh for all inmates, many of whom died from hunger, disease, exhaustion, exposure to the cold, and brutal treatment. But, as psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim and others have noted, Witnesses were uniquely sustained in the camps by the support they gave each other and by their belief that their suffering was part of their work for God. Individual Witnesses

astounded their guards with their refusal to conform to military-type routines like roll call or to roll bandages for soldiers at the front. At the same time, Witnesses were considered unusually trustworthy because they refused to escape from camps or physically resist their guards. For this reason, Witnesses were often used as domestic servants by Nazi camp officers and guards. According to Rudolf Höss, Commandant of Auschwitz, SS Chief Heinrich Himmler often used the “fanatical faith” of Jehovah’s Witnesses as an example to his own SS troops. In his view, SS men had to have the same “unshakable faith” in the National Socialist ideal and in Adolf Hitler that the Witnesses had in Jehovah. Only when all SS men

believed as fanatically in their own philosophy would Adolf Hitler's state be permanently secure.

In the Nazi years, about 10,000 Witnesses were imprisoned in concentration camps, most of them of German nationality. After 1939, small numbers of Witnesses from Austria, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, the Netherlands, Norway, and Poland (some of them refugees from Germany) were arrested and deported to Dachau, Bergen-Belsen,

Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen, Ravensbrück, Auschwitz, Mauthausen, and other concentration camps. An estimated 2,500 to 5,000 Witnesses died in the camps or prisons. More than 200 men were tried by the German War Court and executed for refusing military service.

During the liberation of the camps, Jehovah's Witnesses continued their work, moving among the survivors, making converts.

## FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

### VISIT THE PERMANENT EXHIBITION

*Enemies of the State* (4th floor)

*Prisoners of the Camps* (3rd floor): purple triangular patches; Bible belonging to a Jehovah's Witness who died in Sachsenhausen concentration camp

*The Victims* (2nd and 4th floors): concentration camp uniforms bearing inverted purple triangular patches

*In the Camps* (3rd floor): wooden box given to a Jehovah's Witness prisoner in Buchenwald concentration camp by a Polish political prisoner

### VISIT THE WEXNER LEARNING CENTER (2nd floor)

From the MENU choose TOPIC LIST. From the alphabetical list of topics choose "MOSAIC OF VICTIMS: Victims of Nazi persecution." Touch "Jehovah's Witnesses" to learn more about the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses during the Holocaust.

From the MENU choose ID CARD. Type in the following numbers to read about the experiences of Jehovah's Witnesses who were persecuted during the Holocaust: 5056; 5222; 3095; 4704; 5474; 5454; 5466; 2775; 2765; 4874; 5213; 4424; 5234; 4123; 3243; 4101; 5374; 1434; 5422; 2454.

## MUSEUM HOLDINGS

### LIBRARY

Numerous works on Jehovah's Witnesses.

### COLLECTIONS

Several thousand pages of personal documents, relating to the Kusserow and Jahndorf families in particular. The material documenting Witnesses' imprisonment in various concentration camps includes censored correspondence, arrest orders, records of trials and sentencing of Witnesses to the camps, and photographs.

Nearly 100 oral and videotaped interviews with Jehovah's Witness survivors, the largest collection of its kind.

Numerous photographs depicting prewar life and imprisonment.

## RECOMMENDED READING

Friedman, Ina R. *The Other Victims: First-Person Stories of Non-Jews Persecuted by the Nazis* (Boston, 1990), pp. 47–59.

King, Christine E. "Jehovah's Witnesses under Nazism," in Michael Berenbaum, ed., *A Mosaic of Victims: Non-Jews Persecuted and Murdered by the Nazis* (New York, 1990), pp. 188–193.

King, Christine E. *The Nazi State and the New Religions: Five Case Studies in Non-Conformity* (New York, 1982).

Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York. *Jehovah's Witnesses: Proclaimers of God's Kingdom* (Pennsylvania, 1993).

Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York. *1974 Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses* (Pennsylvania, 1973).

On Video: *Purple Triangles*, the story of the Kusserow family. A Starlock Pictures Production for TVS, 1991. English version distributed by Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, Inc., 25 Columbia Heights, Brooklyn, NY 11201.



United States Holocaust Memorial Museum  
100 Raoul Wallenberg Place, SW Washington, D.C. 20024-2150