

## OTHER VICTIMS

# Christians feared by the Nazis

**JAMES TAYLOR** learns about the heavy price paid by Germany's Jehovah's Witnesses

FROM 1935, one of the smallest categories of prisoners in Nazi camps was distinguished by the purple patch worn on their striped camp uniforms. They were Jehovah's Witnesses, of whom nearly 2,000 were executed or died in Nazi camps out of the 25,000 who had lived in Germany when Hitler came to power.

I met some of those who had survived the camps in January when I addressed a London press launch of an educational video, *Jehovah's Witnesses Stand Firm against Nazi Assault*. They included Annemarie Kusserow, born in 1913 and one of 11 children. Two of her brothers were executed for their beliefs and her parents and siblings suffered in prison, concentration camps or Nazi reform schools.

Annemarie herself was given four years imprisonment in Hamburg for holding a Bible study session in her flat and four years 'loss of honour' for 'demoralisation of armed forces'. Her brother Paul Gerhard at the age of six was sent to a reformatory and thence to a Nazi training school for not paying respect to the regime.

Until recently, relatively little was known about the Nazi persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses. However, researchers are now showing greater interest in this small Christian group which was deemed important enough for a special Gestapo unit to be formed to track down its members. Other small religious organisations were also targeted, but with nothing approaching the severity experienced by Jehovah's Witnesses, whom the Nazis recognised as an ideological rival.

The Nazis, says historian Christine King, disliked the movement's international connections and saw in its claims 'certain links with the international evils of Judaism, communism and freemasonry'.

Founded in America in the 1870s, Jehovah's Witnesses spread to Germany in 1890 where they were known by the term '*Ernstes Bibel Forscher*' (Serious Bible Students). Their non-violent resistance to the Third Reich took many forms, from failing to make the 'Hitler greeting' to rejecting military service.

Their literature, printed either on clandestine presses or outside Germany, contained powerful denunciations of the Nazis. In 1938, the book *Crusade Against Christianity* was published in German, French and Polish. It contained graphic accounts of the brutal treatment of Witnesses in concentration camps. Nobel Prize winner Thomas Mann wrote of its publishers: 'You have done your duty in publishing this book and bringing these facts to light. It seems to me there is no greater appeal to the world's conscience.'

By August 1936, 6,000 Jehovah's Witnesses were in concentration camps. All had the choice of being released if they signed forms repudiating their religion and acknowledging the Nazi government as the highest authority (very few opted to do so). From 1937, they were marked out by the distinctive patch on their prison clothes.

This small group's struggle to hang on to its values and beliefs in the face of brutal persecution warrants historical scrutiny. With the generous assistance of Stephen Morris at the Jehovah's Witnesses' headquarters in London and of Johannes Wrobel at the Watch Tower Archive in Selters, Germany, the Holocaust Exhibition



Heinz Bernecker of Königsberg (foreground) on a prison work-party

Project Office has been assembling material on the experiences of Witnesses between 1933 and 1945.

The Selters archive has donated to the Imperial War Museum a moving letter from Ravensbrück concentration camp written by Mrs Elise Alber to Reinhold and Rose, two of her three children. The eldest, Linda, had been sent by the Nazis to live with 'politically flawless' foster parents. The letter is written on concentration camp notepaper on which was printed: 'The prisoner remains a stubborn Jehovah's Witness and refuses to refrain from the false doctrine of Jehovah's Witnesses.' Mrs Alber had been sent to Ravensbrück for declining to take part in civil defence exercises.

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