

April 15, 2009 Speech Assignment for Public Speaking Class Elizabeth Weiland

Mt. San Jacinto College, California

One Voice

It was 1942 in Nazi Germany. Twenty-year old Wolfgang Kusserow was raised by two loving parents in Bad Lippspringe, Germany. Wolfgang was one of eleven children, six boys and five girls. The Kusserows were a family of deep convictions. They were also very musical, according to his sister, Magdalena.

Now, young Wolfgang is standing before a Nazi military tribunal. He stands there with the full knowledge that just two years earlier, his brother Wilhelm was shot for his refusal to serve in Hitler's army. Wolfgang states before the court that he was brought up according to God's word contained in the Holy Scriptures, He quotes Mark 12:29-31 where it states "You shall love your God above all else, and your neighbor as yourself." He also quotes Exodus 20:13, where it states, "you must not kill." He concludes with the words, "Did our creator have all this written down for the trees?" Those were his final words. Wolfgang Kusserow was beheaded at Brandenburg Penitentiary for refusing to serve in Hitler's army.

Kusserow was a member of a group known in Germany at the time as the "Bibelforscher", meaning "Bible Students."

The Kusserow family story was told in a documentary produced in the United Kingdom called "Purple Triangles" and various journals. The purple triangle was the symbol used to identify the Bibelforscher in the camps. They wore the symbol on their uniforms.

So, why is this important? Hitler and his regime have been gone for over seventy years. This was just one small group among millions who suffered.

It is important because we all have convictions, core beliefs. And holding on to strong convictions, especially in the face of evil, is character building and strengthening. Whether we agree or disagree with a person's beliefs, we can respect when someone is willing to hold on to their convictions even in the face of adversity.

Also, education promotes tolerance and understanding. And as a side note, this small group that we will discuss tonight has fought through the court systems for civil liberties, which have had an impact on our rights as a free society today.

First we will discuss who the Bibelforscher were and what their stance was; why they were persecuted and how others viewed them. Lastly, we will learn how they were able to carry on their work, despite Hitler's attempts to halt their activity.

“Arbeit Macht Frei.” Those German words hover over the entrance gates of former Nazi concentration camps in Europe. Loosely translated, they mean “freedom through work.” For one small group, the Bibelforscher, the words could very well have read, “Freedom through Compromise.” Why? Because this small group of prisoners were the only ones who could leave at any time, simply by signing a declaration renouncing their faith. Few signed. But let’s talk about who they were and what they believed.

They were a Christian group, known before 1935 worldwide as “International Bible Students.” During the Nazi period, they were active in some 50 lands, with a Headquarters branch in Brooklyn, New York.

The group was politically neutral but they were not Pacifists. They believed themselves to be subjects of God’s Kingdom, as spoken about in the Bible; a Kingdom which they believed would one day bring peace to the earth and solve all of humankind’s problems. They believed the Bible to be God’s word, and that it taught that all people are equal in God’s eyes and that they must love even their enemies.

The Bibelforscher believed it was their Christian duty to obey the laws of the land, but only as long as they did not conflict with their scriptural beliefs. Therefore, they refused to serve in Hitler’s army or perform any war-related tasks. They refused to salute the Nazi flag as they believed in only giving their allegiance to God.

They preached their message from the rooftops. They were very active in Germany as well as other parts of the world. They housed a large printing press in Magdeburg, Germany, where they produced over 1 million magazines a month and millions of Bible-based booklets annually.

Dr. Susannah Heschel notes in the documentary “Stand Firm,” that people in Germany knew who they were and “what they stood for.” Historian, Detlef Garbe also noted that this activity “did not go un-noticed by the Nazis.” This brings me to my second point.

Hitler’s camp tried to portray the Bibelforscher as Communists. He viewed their belief system as something that was in direct opposition to his Nazi ideology. He banned the group, shut down their printery, and eventually had many of them arrested. Why though, if they were such a tiny group, and no real threat? For a number of reasons, some of which we touched on.

First of all the Bibelforscher refused to give the “Heil Hitler” salute. Even their children refused to do this, because as they understood it, “Heil” means salvation and they would not attribute salvation to any man, let alone, Hitler. Many members lost their jobs over this, and many children were expelled from school and removed from their homes. Addressing Bibelforscher survivors and others at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Dr. Michael Berenbaum noted how socially and politically disagreeable this was at the time. For a German to not give the Nazi salute simply was unheard of. He called this one act of refusal, “a singular act of civic courage and an unimaginable act of human decency.”

They also spoke out against National Socialism. Holocaust expert, “Dr. Christine King” noted that the group spoke out against National Socialism “from the beginning,” She states that they “spoke out with a tremendous courage and they spoke out with ‘one voice.’” How though? Through their journals, and through distribution of leaflets, and on radio programs. For example:

The documentary "Stand Firm" states, "As early as 1929, the groups' journal "The Golden Age" "boldly spoke out against "National Socialism." "Awake" magazine noted that this was "more than three years before Hitler came into power."

In 1935 the "The Golden Age," exposed the Nazi Regime's "Inquisition like methods and its spy system."

"Stand Firm" also notes that on October 7th, 1934, telegrams of protest by the group were sent to Hitler from 50 countries.

On October 2nd, 1938, an address called "Fascism or Freedom," was given by the groups' President, denouncing Nazi persecution of Jews. It was heard on 50 radio stations worldwide.

The 1938 book called "Crusade against Christianity," published in German; French; and Polish, by the group, was an expose of Nazi torture, including diagrams of concentration camps. Nobel prize winner, "Dr. Thomas Mann," stated of the book, "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."

The Bibelforscher also refused to compromise by serving in Hitler's army or by doing any work that supported the war effort. Others in the camp observed the inability of the SS to break the willpower of the Bibelforscher, even in the face of death. This of course, infuriated the Nazis, but generally won the respect of others.

"Madame Genevieve de Gaulle", the niece of former President of France, "Charles de Gaulle", was a political prisoner, interned at Ravensbruck. She recalled, "What I admired a lot about them is that they could have left at any time, just by signing a renunciation of their faith. Ultimately, these women who appeared to be so weak and worn out, were stronger than the SS, who had power and all the means at their disposal. It was their willpower that no one could beat."

Dr. Christine King stated that she never met a survivor that did not remember them, She states, "They all say similar things." She continued, "They will talk about how they shared food and cared for each other and they will talk about how they were willing to talk with, help and support other prisoners."

Researcher, Teresa Wontor-Cichey stated, "The stance of this little group positively affected other prisoners, and their daily determined resistance strengthened others in the conviction that under all conditions, people can stay faithful to the principles they adhere to."

In the book "Auschwitz" Author "Laurence Rees" notes that "Heinrich Himmler, a top Hitler official, held the example of the Bibelforschers' devotion or "fanaticism" as he called it, as a model of what SS officers should pattern themselves after. He believed that if his men were as dedicated to their Fuhrer as the Bibelforscher were to their God, "only then would Adolf Hitler's state be secure."

The Nazis could never completely halt the preaching work or printing activities of the Bibelforscher in Germany. Never. Hitler has been quoted as screaming "I will exterminate this brood in Germany!" But he never did. As "Stand Firm" notes, "whenever one underground operation was discovered another would pop up in its place," and so they continued learning and they continued their work of

spreading an unpopular religious message. How? In a number of ways. The Bibelforscher found a friend in a Finnish physician named "Felix Kirsten." He was not a member of the group. He was however, the personal physician of Heinrich Himmler. Through Himmler, he was able to procure a number of Bibelforscher prisoners to work at his two estates, "Harstvelde", near Ravensbruck and another estate in Sweden. One such employee, was a woman named "Anni Gustavsson," who worked as a maid in his home in Sweden. Since the work was not under ban in that country, Anni was able to receive Bible literature without a problem. She states in her story that when Dr. Kerstin was about to travel Germany, he would ask her, "Do you have something for me?" meaning her Bible literature. He knew he wouldn't be checked. She would pack the literature in his luggage and he would secretly carry it across the border to his German estate, where Bibelforscher employees would unpack it. Eventually, the literature would be smuggled into both Ravensbruck and Sachsenhausen concentration camps.

When one underground printing operation outside the gates was discovered, it was shut down and the coordinator was beheaded. "Stand Firm" notes that "Amazingly," at that time printing operations were picked up right inside the "Wewelsburg" concentration camp, and as they told it, "right under the noses of the SS guards." Spokesperson at Wewelsburg, "Kersten John" confirms that the group was able to procure a typewriter. She noted that if they had been discovered, they would have been sentenced to death. Former prisoner "Max Hollwig", who was also the camp electrician, said that they kept the typewriter in the dormitory and used it to make stencils for a duplicating machine, made with smuggled parts. They used a silencer for the typewriter. Max rigged up a warning light to inform them if the SS guards were approaching. The secret printing operation supplied enough Bible literature for all of North West Germany.

The group numbers upwards of seven million members worldwide today and run the world's largest printing operation. And on a global scale, they have fought and won legal battles in the courts, to ensure the freedom of right to worship and freedom of speech. In the United States alone, one source noted, "Of the 72 cases involving the Jehovah's Witnesses that have been brought before the U.S. Supreme Court, the Court has ruled in favor of them 47 times." A number of those were landmark decisions that have had a direct bearing on our First Amendment rights. A USA Today article stated, "all religions have this group to thank for the expansion of religious freedom."

Last year I had the privilege of attending an event in Moorepark, California, where the world's oldest Holocaust survivor "Leopold Engleitner", was the guest of honor. He was a member of the Bibelforscher. Last week, I received a statement from Mr. Engleitner that he wished for me to share with all of you. It is lengthy, so for now, I will just share it in part. "I thank you very much for your interest in my life story which represents a story of the persecution of the minority group ...during the Hitler Nazi regime. We were brutally persecuted at that time because we decided to stand firm to biblical principles and would not go to war." He continues, "I want to conclude my statement with a personal request to all of you,..."Tolerance, humanity and peace are among the highest ideals and I ask you to keep this in your mind your whole life. I am convinced that our Almighty God will give you the power to live your life according to his principles...Keep your common sense, your heart and your conscience intact—for your own good and for the good of the people around you."

It's Saturday morning. You just had a great breakfast. You are trying to decide if you should take a drive to the beach or maybe just stay home, have friends over and barbeque. All of a sudden, the

doorbell rings. “Hey, weren’t they just here last month?” Yes, they are back. The Bibelforscher, more commonly known as “Jehovah’s Witnesses.”

Elizabeth Weiland

Public Speaking Class

Mt. San Jacinto College, California