

"The White Rose:" Student Resistance in Germany During WWII

*by John Ginder
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On Friday, August 17, the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation was honored with the presence and words of Dr. George Wittenstein, a "core" member of a group of very close friends that later became known as "The White Rose" resistance group. In the past decade there has been a revival in the attention given to "The White Rose," which promoted the resistance to Nazi ideology during Adolf Hitler's Third Reich. According to Dr. Wittenstein, much of the published accounts regarding "The White Rose" contain inaccuracies, in some cases being entirely incorrect. It is for this reason that Dr. Wittenstein has made it a goal for the remainder of his life to contribute whatever he can to aid in setting the record straight.

An exhibit on resistance in Germany at UCLA sponsored by the German government at which Dr. Wittenstein was invited to speak was an example of insufficient historical research. Before the exhibit was opened to the public, he was given a chance to see it for himself. To his dismay, pictures of his friends in "The White Rose" had been mislabeled and the only successful military putsch (revolt) against Hitler was not even mentioned (another fact that often goes unmentioned is that "The White Rose" was the only group which addressed the treatment and extermination of Jews). At the last minute, Dr. Wittenstein changed his original speech to address these inaccuracies. A reporter approached him that day after his revised speech from the LA Times who remarked, "once a rebel, always a rebel."

Dr. Wittenstein stressed the fact that in most democratic societies today it is impossible for people to even begin to comprehend the oppressive nature of Hitler's total dictatorship, which makes it difficult to explain. The Nazi party was extremely efficient in establishing itself as the new government and within days of Hitler's appointment as Chancellor, the Nazis had taken control over every aspect of public life. Every city block had an informer who reported any "suspicious" activity to the Gestapo (secret police). Communication was monitored to such an extent that in one case, Dr. Wittenstein recalled, while sitting in a theater watching the news, a man was arrested by the Gestapo. No doubt he must have made a negative comment about the regime.

Under these conditions, any form of resistance was extremely dangerous and finding allies was impossible for all practical purposes. Without open communication resistance groups had no way of knowing if other groups even existed. It was not until after the war that Dr. Wittenstein discovered that approximately three hundred other groups had been operating in Germany at the time. In the early years of Hitler's regime, there were youth groups (similar to the US Boy Scouts) called "Bundische Jugend" throughout Germany and Europe until the mid-1930s when Hitler banned them and forced their members into the ranks of his new "Hitler Youth." To add to the difficulty of mobilizing an opposition against a total dictatorship, the majority of the German people had been indoctrinated with Nazi propaganda. This "education" began as early as age four, and was intensified for the older children in the "Hitler Youth" program, in which membership became mandatory in the late 1930s. What must be noted though, is that it was not

until near the war's end that the truth of the atrocities being committed by the Nazis was known. Instead, the German public was presented with lies and false hope in the form of propaganda glorifying Hitler.

The friends of "The White Rose" were middle-class students with parents who shared their anti-Nazi sentiment. They had access to the "truth," as Dr. Wittenstein explained, in the form of radio broadcasts and literature from Switzerland (which was politically neutral) and the BBC. Once the war had started, listening to foreign radio stations was punishable by death. Since all Hitler as "degenerate" being forbidden, resistance groups relied on "underground" sources of information.

In 1938, the year he considers the true beginning of "The White Rose," Dr. Wittenstein met Alexander Schmorell while serving his two-year mandatory military training. In their barracks the two 19-year-olds discussed resistance as well as common academic interests and became close friends. One of the few accounts that Dr. Wittenstein acknowledged as correctly stated throughout all books written about "The White Rose," was this quote by Alexander Schmorell: "Maybe ten years from now there will be a plaque on this door [of the barracks] which will read: 'This is where the revolution began'."

After their service ended in 1939, the two men attended the University of Munich where they met Hans Scholl and Helmut Hartert. Christoph Probst, a student and father of two (very uncommon for students at the time) joined later and became Dr. Wittenstein's closest friend. This "tightly knit" group of friends was for the most part apolitical medical students, discussing more academic issues such as philosophy and art. After the war, in an effort to memorialize her siblings, Inge Scholl, the elder sister of Hans and Sophie, wrote mostly about them in her book entitled "The White Rose". This led to the now commonly accepted perception that the others who contributed equally and who were also executed played insignificant roles. As the group of friends became more aware of the horrific deeds of the Nazis, they realized the need for action. The only method possible was by writing and distributing leaflets, which was much more dangerous than one would think. Purchasing mass amounts of paper and stamps immediately roused suspicion. In 1942 the first four leaflets were written by Schmorell and Scholl, the first and fourth almost entirely by Scholl, Wittenstein edited the third and fourth leaflets. These leaflets were very idealistic and implied a more passive approach to resistance. Quoting many famous philosophers, they were targeted toward the intellectual community.

After a philosophy professor missed two lectures with no explanation, Wittenstein and a painter friend led about fifty fellow students to the university President's office to demand the whereabouts of the teacher. The President, who was visibly disturbed and frightened, because such action was unheard of in Nazi Germany, denied any knowledge Dr. Wittenstein and his friend then led the group of students on a "sympathy demonstration" through the streets of Munich to the professor's apartment. Such an open protest (in broad daylight) was until then unthinkable. The student unrest was growing.

As was true for all medical students, the friends were drafted into the military but permitted to continue their studies in uniform. In the summer of 1942 they were sent to serve at the Russian

front where they gained a new member and friend, Willi Graf. While in Russia, they were exposed to the true extent of the atrocities being committed by the Nazis. Because of Schmorell's ability to speak the language, they had frequent interaction with the Russian people and came to realize that they were genuinely good-natured, despite Hitler's propaganda describing them as barbaric animals. Upon their return from Russia, Wittenstein felt that the passive, philosophical approach was not enough and pushed for more active resistance. A fifth leaflet was written that took this new approach, but it unfortunately required an enormous sacrifice. The group now realized that in order to save their beloved country, Germany must lose the war as soon as possible.

As more students became aware of the true intentions of Hitler's plan, the resentment increased. At the University of Munich one event sparked an almost total riot. The Gauleiter (a Nazi appointed head-of-state) of Bavaria delivered a speech at the university in which he berated the female students for continuing their studies, while instead they should be producing children for Hitler's "master race." He went so far as to offer access to his male staff if they were unable to find a boyfriend on their own. Obviously outraged, the female students attempted to walk out but were stopped and arrested by Gestapo guards. The male students revolted and took the stage, holding the leader of the Nazi student organization hostage until the women were allowed to leave.

After the disappearance of his first professor, Dr. Wittenstein found a new mentor for his Ph.D thesis in psychology in Professor Kurt Huber, who agreed with the ideals of "The White Rose" and active resistance. In February of 1943 came the fall of Stalingrad and the printing of the sixth and final leaflet. In another example of misrepresentation, many sources claim that the students wrote the sixth leaflet, when in fact Professor Huber himself wrote it.

On February 18, 1943, the final leaflet was distributed. Hans Scholl and his younger sister, Sophie (who had joined the group despite Hans' insistence on her safety), clandestinely placed the leaflet throughout the University of Munich. As they left the building they must have realized that they had a few copies remaining and went back inside to drop them into the courtyard from above. They were spotted by a janitor and were immediately arrested. In the following months all but one suspected of being associated with "The White Rose" were arrested.

During his arrest, a draft leaflet written by Christoph Probst was found in Hans Scholl's pocket, which he tried in vain to tear up and swallow. Christoph Probst was promptly arrested and stood trial with the Scholl siblings. Hitler's "Peoples Court," which was established to eliminate his enemies (usually by death sentences), flew to Munich from its usual venue in Berlin only four days after the arrests to hold the trial. After a very brief trial, Hans and Sophie Scholl and Christoph Probst were immediately executed by guillotine. Alexander Schmorell, Willi Graf, and Professor Kurt Huber were tried by the People's Court in April of the same year and executed later. In his defense, Huber gave a speech in which he stated, "...I demand the freedom of the German people..."

Having been warned that the Gestapo was once again tracking him Dr. Wittenstein requested transfer to the Italian front, which was out of the range Gestapo jurisdiction and saved him from prosecution. He had already been involved with the "Freiheitsaktion Bayern," a Bavarian

resistance group that later carried out the only successful putsch against Hitler (as mentioned above, this is yet another historical fact that has been distorted, in this case being completely omitted). Dr. Rupprecht Cerngross, a commander of an unarmed interpreters unit, managed to weed out Nazi supporters under his command, whom he promptly sent to Russia. The unit obtained a huge arsenal of light weapons (grenades, rifles, etc.). It was in Italy, that Dr. Wittenstein collected diverse weapons and had them transported to this group in Munich. With the help of a like-minded tank commander and his unit, this group overtook the main radio station and disarmed all bridges leading into the city. As the US forces reached Munich, the resistance group announced over the radio that the citizens must wave white flags in surrender and arrest all the "little Nazis" before they could escape. In this way, Munich was spared total destruction by resisting Hitler's order that every city must be defended to the last man.

This is, of course, only a brief overview of the story of "The White Rose," as Dr. Wittenstein explained, but for myself it had a significant impact, as my mother was born in 1939 near Munich. As a child she witnessed the bombing of her hometown and still recalls running for shelter amidst the flames and destruction. Because of the emotional nature of the topic, she, like Dr. Wittenstein, is usually somewhat reluctant to discuss the past. Both her older brother and father served in the German military, but only her father, an interpreter, survived. Her older brother, Otto, was a fighter pilot for the "Luftwaffe" (German Airforce) and was killed in battle in 1944. As a young boy, I was passionate about flying, so too was my uncle. I remember my mother sitting me down and showing me photos of her older brother when he was close to my age at the time and how emotionally difficult it was for her. He and his friends, being only 13 or 14 years old, had built full-scale gliders that they would launch and pilot from the hilltops of Bavaria. These same friends, only four or five years later were flying warplanes, most of them never returning.

It was not until recently, when I told her that Dr. Wittenstein was coming to speak about "The White Rose," that I really discussed the war again with my mother. After looking through the old photos again, I realized that my uncle and his friends probably built those gliders as part of their training in the "Hitler Youth" (after noticing the swastikas painted on the planes and the officer accompanying them). As impressive young boys, they were undoubtedly filled with enthusiasm as they built and flew their own aircraft. As they began flying for the "Luftwaffe" as trained fighter pilots, the faces in the pictures began to change. In a matter of a few years, the enthusiastic young boys began to look like weary old men. According to my mother, my uncle in particular became disillusioned as he realized the futility of Hitler's war.

As Dr. Wittenstein talked about the female students' revolt at the University of Munich, it reminded me of stories my mother told me of Hitler's plans for the German women to provide him with as many offspring as possible. Hitler declared that he would be the Godfather of every family's fourth child, and upon bearing a fifth child, the mother would receive a gold medal. After speaking with my mother and hearing Dr. Wittenstein, I can only hope that I have gained some further understanding of the hardships endured by those living under Hitler's dictatorship. I do realize though, now better than before, that resisting oppression may be life threatening, but in extreme circumstances it is the only way to protect one's freedom. The truth must be told and the people must listen.