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## **The White Rose: A Lesson in Dissent** **by Jacob G. Hornberger**

The date was February 22, 1943. Hans Scholl and his sister Sophie, along with their best friend, Christoph Probst, were scheduled to be executed by Nazi officials that afternoon. The prison guards were so impressed with the calm and bravery of the prisoners in the face of impending death that they violated regulations by permitting them to meet together one last time. Hans, a medical student at the University of Munich, was 24. Sophie, a student, was 21. Christoph, a medical student, was 22.

This is the story of The White Rose. It is a lesson in dissent. It is a tale of courage--of principle--of honor. It is detailed in three books: *The White Rose* (1970) by Inge Scholl, *A Noble Treason* (1979) by Richard Hanser, and *An Honourable Defeat* (1994) by Anton Gill.

Hans and Sophie Scholl were German teenagers in the 1930s. Like other young Germans, they enthusiastically joined the Hitler Youth. They believed that Adolf Hitler was leading Germany and the German people back to greatness.

Their parents were not so enthusiastic. Their father--Robert Scholl--told his children that Hitler and the Nazis were leading Germany down a road of destruction. Later--in 1942--he would serve time in a Nazi prison for telling his secretary: "The war! It is already lost. This Hitler is God's scourge on mankind, and if the war doesn't end soon the Russians will be sitting in Berlin."

Gradually, Hans and Sophie began realizing that their father was right. They concluded that, in the name of freedom and the greater good of the German nation, Hitler and the Nazis were enslaving and destroying the German people.

They also knew that open dissent was impossible in Nazi Germany, especially after the start of World War II. Most Germans took the traditional position--that once war breaks out, it is the duty of the citizen to support the troops by supporting the government.

But Hans and Sophie Scholl believed differently. They believed that it was the duty of a citizen, even in times of war, to stand up against an evil regime, especially when it is sending hundreds of thousands of its citizens to their deaths.

The Scholl siblings began sharing their feelings with a few of their friends--Christoph Probst, Alexander Schmorell, Willi Graf--as well as with Kurt Huber, their psychology and philosophy professor.

One day in 1942, copies of a leaflet entitled "The White Rose" suddenly appeared at the University of Munich. The leaflet contained an anonymous essay that said that the Nazi system had slowly imprisoned the German people and was now destroying them. The Nazi regime had turned evil. It was time, the essay said, for Germans to rise up and resist the tyranny of their own government. At the bottom of the essay, the following request appeared: "Please make as many copies of this leaflet as you can and distribute them."

The leaflet caused a tremendous stir among the student body. It was the first time that internal dissent against the Nazi regime had surfaced in Germany. The essay had been secretly written and distributed by Hans Scholl and his friends.

Another leaflet appeared soon afterward. And then another. And another. Ultimately, there were six leaflets published and distributed by Hans and Sophie Scholl and their friends--four under the title "The White Rose" and two under the title "Leaflets of the Resistance." Their publication took place periodically between 1942 and 1943--interrupted for a few months when Hans and his friends were temporarily sent to the Eastern Front to fight against the Russians.

The members of The White Rose, of course, had to act cautiously. The Nazi regime maintained an iron grip over German society. Internal dissent was quickly and efficiently smashed by the Gestapo. Hans and Sophie Scholl and their friends knew what would happen to them if they were caught.

People began receiving copies of the leaflets in the mail. Students at the University of

Hamburg began copying and distributing them. Copies began turning up in different parts of Germany and Austria.

Moreover, as Hanser points out, the members of The White Rose did not limit themselves to leaflets. Graffiti began appearing in large letters on streets and buildings all over Munich: "Down with Hitler! . . . Hitler the Mass Murderer!" and "Freiheit!

. . . Freiheit! . . . Freedom! . . . Freedom!"

The Gestapo was driven into a frenzy. It knew that the authors were having to procure large quantities of paper, envelopes, and postage. It knew that they were using a duplicating machine. But despite the Gestapo's best efforts, it was unable to catch the perpetrators.

One day--February 18, 1943--Hans' and Sophie's luck ran out. They were caught leaving pamphlets at the University of Munich and were arrested. A search disclosed evidence of Christoph Probst's participation, and he too was soon arrested. The three of them were indicted for treason.

On February 22--four days after their arrest--their trial began. The presiding judge, Roland Freisler, chief justice of the People's Court of the Greater German Reich, had been sent from Berlin. Hanser writes:

"He conducted the trial as if the future of the Reich were indeed at stake. He roared denunciations of the accused as if he were not the judge but the prosecutor. He behaved alternately like an actor ranting through an overwritten role in an implausible melodrama and a Grand Inquisitor calling down eternal damnation on the heads of the three irredeemable heretics before him. . . . No witnesses were called, since the defendants had admitted everything. The proceedings consisted almost entirely of Roland Freisler's denunciation and abuse, punctuated from time to time by half-hearted offerings from the court-appointed defense attorneys, one of whom summed up his case with the observation, "I can only say *fiat justitia* . Let justice be done." By which he meant: Let the accused get what they deserve.

Freisler and the other accusers could not understand what had happened to these German youths. After all, they all came from nice German families. They all had attended German schools. They had been members of the Hitler Youth. How could

they have turned out to be traitors? What had so twisted and warped their minds?

Sophie Scholl shocked everyone in the courtroom when she remarked to Freisler: "Somebody, after all, had to make a start. What we wrote and said is also believed by many others. They just don't dare to express themselves as we did." Later in the proceedings, she said to him: "You know the war is lost. Why don't you have the courage to face it?"

In the middle of the trial, Robert and Magdalene Scholl tried to enter the courtroom. Magdalene said to the guard: "But I'm the mother of two of the accused." The guard responded: "You should have brought them up better." Robert Scholl forced his way into the courtroom and told the court that he was there to defend his children. He was seized and forcibly escorted outside. The entire courtroom heard him shout: "One day there will be another kind of justice! One day they will go down in history!"

Robert Freisler pronounced his judgment on the three defendants: Guilty of treason. Their sentence: Death.

They were escorted back to Stadelheim prison, where the guards permitted Hans and Sophie to have one last visit with their parents. Hans met with them first, and then Sophie. Hansen writes:

"His eyes were clear and steady and he showed no sign of dejection or despair. He thanked his parents again for the love and warmth they had given him and he asked them to convey his affection and regard to a number of friends, whom he named. Here, for a moment, tears threatened, and he turned away to spare his parents the pain of seeing them. Facing them again, his shoulders were back and he smiled. . . .

"Then a woman prison guard brought in Sophie. . . . Her mother tentatively offered her some candy, which Hans had declined. "Gladly," said Sophie, taking it. "After all, I haven't had any lunch!" She, too, looked somehow smaller, as if drawn together, but her face was clear and her smile was fresh and unforced, with something in it that her parents read as triumph. "Sophie, Sophie," her mother murmured, as if to herself. "To think you'll never be coming through the door again!" Sophie's smile was gentle. "Ah, Mother," she said. "Those few little years. . . ." Sophie Scholl looked at her parents and was strong in her pride and certainty. "We took everything upon ourselves," she said. "What we did will cause waves." Her mother spoke again:

"Sophie," she said softly, "Remember Jesus." "Yes," replied Sophie earnestly, almost commandingly, "but you, too." She left them, her parents, Robert and Magdalene Scholl, with her face still lit by the smile they loved so well and would never see again. She was perfectly composed as she was led away. Robert Mohr [a Gestapo official], who had come out to the prison on business of his own, saw her in her cell immediately afterwards, and she was crying. It was the first time Robert Mohr had seen her in tears, and she apologized. "I have just said good-bye to my parents," she said. "You understand . . ." She had not cried before her parents. For them she had smiled."

No relatives visited Christoph Probst. His wife, who had just had their third child, was in the hospital. Neither she nor any members of his family even knew that he was on trial or that he had been sentenced to death. While his faith in God had always been deep and unwavering, he had never committed to a certain faith. On the eve of his death, a Catholic priest admitted him into the church *in articulo mortis* --at the point of death. "Now," he said, "my death will be easy and joyful."

That afternoon, the prison guards permitted Hans, Sophie, and Christoph to have one last visit together. Sophie was then led to the guillotine. One observer described her as she walked to her death: "Without turning a hair, without flinching." Christoph Probst was next. Hans Scholl was last; just before he was beheaded, Hans cried out: "Long live freedom!"

Unfortunately, they were not the last to die. The Gestapo's investigation was relentless. Later tried and executed were Alex Schmorell (age 25), Willi Graf (age 25), and Kurt Huber (age 49). Students at the University of Hamburg were either executed or sent to concentration camps.

Today, every German knows the story of The White Rose. A square at the University of Munich is named after Hans and Sophie Scholl. And there are streets, squares, and schools all over Germany named for the members of The White Rose. The German movie *The White Rose* is now found in video stores in Germany and the United States.

Richard Hansen sums up the story of The White Rose:

"In the vogue words of the time, the Scholls and their friends represented the "other" Germany, the land of poets and thinkers, in contrast to the Germany that was

reverting to barbarism and trying to take the world with it. What they were and what they did would have been "other" in any society at any time. What they did transcended the easy division of good-German/bad-German and lifted them above the nationalism of time-bound events. Their actions made them enduring symbols of the struggle, universal and timeless, for the freedom of the human spirit wherever and whenever it is threatened."

*Mr. Hornberger is founder and president of The Future of Freedom Foundation.*

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