

**Opening of the exhibition:**  
**“What could they do? – Resistance against National Socialism 1939–1945”**  
**European Parliament, Brussels, 20 May 2025**  
**Redetext: Julia Wagner**

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear friends of democracy,

I want you to imagine something.

It is 2025, you are 17 years old. You are at home, listening to a podcast from abroad. Maybe you are printing out what you heard, sharing it with your friends. Feels harmless, right?

But in 1942, for doing exactly that, a 17-year-old named Helmuth Hübener was executed. He listened to forbidden foreign broadcasts. He printed and distributed leaflets with the truth he heard. And for that, the Nazis killed him.

At 17. For telling the truth.

Yet—he dared to listen anyway. He dared to speak.

Those are the faces we honour tonight.

This exhibition tells 24 stories—24 portraits of resistance.

In 1933, Adolf Hitler and the National Socialists seized political power in Germany. They built a dictatorship. Most Germans followed enthusiastically—or adapted, hoping for personal advantage. Some remained passive. But only a few stood up. Only a few dared to oppose the violations of human rights, the crimes of the new rulers.

They used the narrow, dangerous spaces that even a dictatorship left open for political action. Each person had to make a choice: Would they join? Would they wait in silence? Or would they resist?

When Germany invaded Poland in September 1939, the regime’s brutality escalated. Yet a small minority of Germans continued to resist—actively, bravely, knowing the cost.

Some spread information from banned broadcasts. Some printed and distributed illegal leaflets. Others risked everything to hide persecuted Jews, prisoners of war, and forced labourers. And some—yes, some—plotted to overthrow Hitler, to end his criminal reign.

But resistance was not only military. It was not only aristocratic. It was not only men. It was diverse. And that’s what this exhibition shows us so powerfully.

I stand here tonight, humbled by their courage.

Because their stories force us to ask: What would I have done?

Would I have dared to listen to a banned radio, like Dagmar Petersen?

Would I have dared to hide a Jewish neighbour, like Margarete and Wilhelm Daene?

Would I have dared to write the truth on a postcard, like Elise and Otto Hampel?

Would I have dared to refuse military service, like Hermann Stöhr?

We often think of resistance as something heroic, something grand, something distant. We think of Claus von Stauffenberg with his military uniform and his bomb. Nevertheless, resistance is also ordinary. Quiet. Small. Female. Invisible.

For too long, the stories of women in resistance were overlooked. Yes, we know Sophie Scholl. But what about Liane Berkowitz, who posted anti-Nazi stickers and was executed at 19?

What about Emmy Zehden, who hid her nephew to save him from military service—and was beheaded for it?

What about Dagmar Petersen, sitting in a small apartment, risking everything just to hear the truth?

For decades, these women were barely mentioned. Their acts seemed too small, too private, too domestic to count as “real” resistance. But today, we know: there is no such thing as a small act of resistance. Every act of conscience is a spark.

And these sparks, together, lit up some of the the darkest nights Europe has ever seen.

This exhibition gives us their faces. Not just generals and officers. But teachers, students, artists, bakers, engineers, secretaries. People who had no weapons, no power, no protection—except for their courage.

Moreover, it reminds us: resistance does not begin with a bomb. It begins with a decision. A decision not to look away. A decision to act.

And I ask you: What decisions do we face today?

Because let us be honest: “Never again” is not a promise fulfilled. “Never again” is a task unfinished. And never again is now.

When anti-Semitic conspiracy theories spread online.  
When Jewish cemeteries are desecrated.  
When Holocaust survivors are harassed in the streets.

When pride parades are banned in European capitals like Budapest in 2025.  
When “LGBT-free zones” are declared across towns in Poland.  
When women’s rights are dismantled by constitutional courts.  
When media freedom is crushed by governments consolidating power.  
When journalists are imprisoned or murdered for exposing corruption.  
When political opposition is prosecuted on fabricated charges.

When, across the Atlantic, the President of the United States attacks democratic institutions, calls judges “enemies,” refuses oversight, promises revenge, and openly undermines the rule of law.

When Supreme Courts roll back voting rights, abortion rights, and minority protections.

We cannot say “never again” while looking away. We cannot honour resistance while tolerating oppression.

I serve on the Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs in the European Parliament. And every day, I see how fragile freedom is. How fragile democracy is. How fragile human dignity is.

It does not survive by itself. It needs defenders. It needs people willing to speak up—even when it is uncomfortable. Even when it is unpopular.

That is why this exhibition matters.

Because it is not just a tribute to 24 individuals from the past. It is a call to each of us. To see them not as distant heroes, but as mirrors. To ask: Where am I called to resist? Where am I called to act?

And tonight, as we honour these 24 portraits, I want to tell you: there is a 25th portrait among us.

Because among us stands Dr Axel Smend, son of Günther Smend, a member of the military resistance around Claus von Stauffenberg, executed in 1944.

Axel Smend has dedicated his life to preserving the memory of the resistance—and showing why it still matters today.

So tonight, as we look at these portraits, we do not just see the past. We see a legacy. A responsibility.

Their fight is not over. Their courage calls us. Their question remains: What could they do? And more importantly—what can we do?

Thank you.