

Opening of the exhibition
“What could they do? Resistance against National Sozialism 1939-1945”
European Parliament, Brussels, 20 May 2025
- Dr. Axel Smend -

Dear ladies and gentlemen, dear guests,

I am very happy to welcome you, taking on a subject which is rather unknown outside of Germany:
The opposition within the Third Reich.

Dear Mr. Körner, thank you for your introduction. I am very grateful to you as you already provided some context of those days and described consequences, especially to reflect about our own imperatives to take responsibility for our democracies.

Dear Julia Wagner,

I would like to express my sincere gratitude for highly professional preparation of this exhibition. It is truly remarkable to witness the personal commitment and passionate perspective you have brought to its curation: in your treatment of the protagonists, their fates, and their messages they convey to us all.

I have to emphasize again:

At first, *most* Germans were enthusiastic about National Socialism; others adapted, some remained passive; very few opposed.

Resistance should arise from all circles of society. From Communists, socialists and workers' unions. From artists, intellectuals and students. From the churches and the military. From conspiring groups and courageous individuals.

To me it always was the moral courage of those resistance fighters, that impressed me. And particularly of the individual protagonists. They all had in common to have decided *against* an evil regime and *for* their own conscience. And consequently they all **had to be** prepared, to be spied upon, threatened, expelled, imprisoned or murdered. Risking their lives - and those of their families.

Outstanding among them certainly Dietrich Bonhoeffer – a world - wide known theologian and pastor.

From both institutional churches in Germany - the Protestant and the Catholic - there never was an opposition, which would have endangered the Nazi regime. It was down to individual representatives of the churches to opt for resistance.

As early as 1933, Bonhoeffer took a public stand against the Nazi persecution of Jews. In 1938 he joined the resistance and made bonds with allied governments. As a theologian he justified the tyrannicide. That basically was the theological allowance to kill Hitler. Bonhoeffer was arrested in April 1943, remained in prison without trial, and was murdered in 1945 in Flossenbürg concentration camp.

Very different in background and actions were the Scholl siblings:

Die Weiße Rose, the White Rose, was the name of a resistance group - founded in 1942 by a circle of friends around Hans and Sophie Scholl. The young students conceived, printed and distributed a total of six leaflets in Munich and other German cities with increasing circulation. In these leaflets they denounced the violent crimes of the Nazi regime. They called for "passive resistance" against Hitler and demanded the overthrow of his regime.

On February 18, 1943, Hans and Sophie Scholl laid out the sixth leaflet at Munich University. It was directed against the "terrible bloodbath" of the Nazis in Europe. They were caught and denounced by the custodian and arrested by the Gestapo. Four days later they were beheaded.

Hans Scholl - executed at the age of 24 by a guillotine - is attributed the sentence: *"We don't have to do something, I have to do something"*. What a maxim for one's actions! Don't hesitate, but take the initiative yourself and be prepared to make a difference.

Hans' sister Sophie says on the day of her execution - she is 21 years old - to the dreaded judge Roland Freisler's face: *"Somebody has to start with this after all"*. Even if there may be despair and loneliness in this sentence, there is also hope in it, and it gives strength to this day to ask oneself: "What can I do today?" A timeless message for all of us, I think.

Prison officials, in later describing the scene, emphasized the courage with which Sophie walked to her execution. Her last words were: *"It's such a fine, sunny day, and I have to go. But what does my death matter, if through us, thousands of people are awakened and stirred to action?"*

There were a number of planned and executed attacks on the life of Adolf Hitler. The culmination of all attempts was surely the assassination by Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg on 20 July 1944.

Following the failure of various assassination plans he resolved to try to kill Hitler himself. This plot should not be a "military coup" but a joint attempt with civil resistance circles to liberate Germany from dictatorship and put an immediate end to the war.

The aim was to stop the horrific acts of Nazi violence and crime, not least the mass murder of the Jews. At the same time, their act was to be a clear sign of a "different Germany".

On July 20 th Stauffenberg flew to the "Führer's" headquarter, Wolfsschanze, in today's Poland, to take part in a discussion of the war situation with Hitler. This unexpectedly took place - it was a very hot day - in a lightweight barrack and not as usual in the bunker. Therefore, the bomb that Stauffenberg had smuggled in - hidden in a briefcase near Hitler - failed to have the desired effect. Moreover, at the time of the explosion Hitler bent over the heavy oak chart table that protected him. Four people died, Hitler survived.

Stauffenberg had left the room before the explosion. And still in the assumption, that Hitler was killed, he hurried to Berlin, to lead the coup d'état and attempted to persuade senior officers to support the coup. At the end, he didn't succeed.

Stauffenberg and four co-conspirators were shot to death in that very night in the inner courtyard of the Berlin Bendlerblock.

The same night Hitler addressed the German public in a radio speech. He depicted himself as an instrument of "providence", accusing "a small clique" of ambitious officers of having committed treason in their lust for power.

The Gestapo immediately appointed a "Special Commission 20 July 1944", arresting more than 600 people. The officers among them were expelled from the Wehrmacht and, as a rule, sentenced to death at the People's Court under its ferocious President Roland Freisler for treason.

Hitler had ordered that those found guilty should be "hanged like cattle". In the Plötzensee execution shed in Berlin alone, 89 people were hanged. Others chose suicide or died in prison. A total of about 150 people were killed by the regime in direct connection with the attempted coup.

My father was an accomplice to the plot of July the 20 th 1944. He had been

a member of the Army General Staff since December 1942 and was appointed adjutant to General Colonel Zeitzler, the then Chief of Staff of the German Army. Both usually took part in the situation meetings with Hitler and therefore had a good overview of the war situation.

It was in the General Staff where our father first came into contact with the resistance. He subsequently took part in meetings, initially aimed at eliminating Hitler in the sense of **imprisonment**. Later, this was followed by plans for the actual assassination of Hitler. At Stauffenberg's request, he tried to win his superior Zeitzler for the coup.

My father paid for his complicity with his death and was hanged in Plötzensee on September the 8th, 1944.

Now I invite you to a very personal approach to my father.

On October the 3rd, 1944 the postman rings our doorbell in Lüneburg in Northern Germany and hands my 4-year-old sister a blue envelope; Sender: Der Oberreichsanwalt, the Reich's senior prosecutor. My sister gives the envelope to my mother - at that time 27 years old. She is currently feeding me - I was 5 months old. My three-year-old brother is also in the room.

The Oberreichsanwalt wrote to my mother: "The former lieutenant-colonel Günther Smend was sentenced to death by the People's Court of the Greater German Reich for high treason. The sentence has been executed." The official notification is accompanied by an invoice for the cost of the execution still to be paid.

My mother had the last contact with our father on July the 20th, the day of the assassination. In his little book he wrote: *"At night we spoke on the phone. You were happy to hear my voice - I already knew I wouldn't see you again. It couldn't be any different"*.

My mother remembers later: *"He was very serious, he probably expected the worst."*

Since that phone call, my mother has had no contact with her husband. Not until the beginning of August did she learn that he was being held at the Reich Main Security Office in Berlin. For the Gestapo appears at our home in Lüneburg to pick up a little suitcase for the prisoner, with the remark to my mother: *"But you can leave belt and tie at home right away"*.

So what happened to my father between July the 20th and the day of his execution?

On August the 1st my father - then 31 years old - was arrested by SS men at the Berlin train station and taken to the Gestapo headquarters.

In his little book he writes the day before: *"I knew that I would be arrested the next day. Despite many doubts, the end was clear to me. It had to be like this."*

After his arrest, he was questioned on the same day; in particular about his assessment of his superior; about Hitler's state of war as well as about the mood and attitude of Generals and the younger General Staff officers.

I cannot say whether the interrogation report was drawn up under torture; Ian Kershaw writes of clear indications that my father, just like others, was tortured very much, and that the Gestapo "treated" him, as it was then called, several times.

My father must have expected his execution. Thus, in his interrogation he did not hold back with criticism of the "Führer". He also clearly pointed out the increasing discrepancy between the recommendations of the General Staff and Hitler's decisions taken then. I quote: *"There was no longer any firm belief in Hitler."* He hinted that thoughts of Hitler's elimination were circulating.

These records certainly did not help save his life. Therefore, in the trial of 29th of August before the People's Court, chaired by a screaming and ranting President Freisler, he was sentenced to death. It is a show trial, like the other assassination trials, in which the defendant himself, his life and his dignity no longer had any value for the judge. *"The dagger of the murderer was hidden under the robe of the lawyers,"* as it says in the verdict of the 1947 Nuremberg Trial; I add: *"In Freisler's case, the dagger even lay open on the judge's table, already blood-stained."*

What might a young man like my father, 31 years old, father of three small children, married since March 1939 - my mother once said: "We were married for five years; of which we were together for about eight months including weeks of peace, holidays and convalescent leave. Our marriage consisted of field post and field telephones. It is an unforgettable, happy memory."

So what might he have felt in the 38 days between arrest, conviction and execution? What did he think when he stood in front of Freisler and had to look this beast in the eye? How did he endure torture? Did he have doubts about his own decision? What was his last thought before he was hung in Plötzensee?

Our Father has left us a treasure, a little book; this book: "Gedanken sind Kräfte", "Thoughts are Forces" offers readings for every day of the year on various topics.

The focus is on biblical texts, accompanied by quotations from literature and philosophy. He was allowed to keep the little book until his death. In it he has marked sayings with a pencil, has commented on some, or has added his own thoughts to certain dates.

About faith he notes there:

"Need teaches prayer; I have learned it anew. This little book was a great comfort to me in the days before my death. It was the same for me as it was for most people: I found the way to God in the greatest spiritual need and it helped a lot. I also want my children to grow up in this faith and to know that their father found comfort in him."

In regard to himself, he strongly marks the Bible passage of August the 1st from Timothy 2:4, verse 7; it reads:

"I have fought a good fight, I have finished the course, I have held faith."

My father comments, that this verse *"fits so well for him"*.

Other remarks mostly concern loving thoughts about his wife and three children - in great anxiety, as he no longer knows anything about them.

In his notes written in prison for my mother - often on snippets of paper from newspaper edges or toilet paper, and hidden in a photo frame - as well as in his last letter to her, the following thoughts are expressed again and again:

I quote as far as possible -

- *the "dreadful thought" of not seeing his wife and children again;*
- *the "oppressive" thought of "throwing his wife and children into an immeasurable misfortune, since they will never get rid of the odium, of being the wife and children of a traitor," - also with the proposal to my mother to "take up her maiden name again in order to keep blemishes away from her and the children";*
- *and the resulting thought that the family would have to move out immediately, but would not find another home as a traitor family;*

As my father had feared, we, just like other families from the resistance, had to leave our flat immediately; the very modest fortune was confiscated; the payment of a widow's or even half-orphan's pension was out of the question, because from one day to the next we were a "traitor family".

I can even understand that at that time, after the 20th of July, the general public, who stood by the "Führer" and by the unshakeable misbelief in the final victory, avoided the widows of traitors. In particular after the names of the traitors had been published in large print in all daily newspapers. The treatment of widows until the end of the war and also in the years thereafter in offices and authorities, in shops and schools was often correspondingly degrading.

Even today my siblings and I wonder how our mother organized and mastered our life after my father's death; we probably grew even closer - not just in terms of space. Lack of money - nothing unusual at that time anyway - played no real role for us. We somehow "made ends meet".

Much more important, however, was the broken heart and the despair of our mother, confronted overnight with her husband hanging from the gallows of Plötzensee.

Many children had lost their father in the war. It was nothing unusual at that time to only be raised by the mother. But the first time I realized that something was different with *my* father was in 1954, when my mother returned from Parents' Evening, shaken and with teary eyes, not because I was bad at school - which I was - but because of the comment of my teacher: "Being the son of a traitor, it is no wonder that Axel fails at school".

At that time the "traitor theory" was still a common body of thought in Germany - certainly nourished by the fact that the judges, teachers and civil servants of the past *"already a short time after the end of the war sat again in the courts, universities and ministries of the young Federal Republic"*. Former blood judges were promoted, crimes remained unpunished. Apart from the Nuremberg Trials, no judge was called to account for his actions.

The establishment of the "July 20, 1944 Foundation" was therefore a blessing for the "traitor families". The widows, some of those husbands were friends, were brought together, also their children. It was precisely between them that a lifelong mutual trust, based on the same foundation, developed. This "spiritual support" was certainly the most difficult but also the most beautiful task for the foundation. It also provided legal advice for numerous widows and was able to generate financial aid for affected families from private sources.

Today – the widows have all passed away and the surviving children are all over 80 years old – the July 20, 1944 Foundation bears responsibilities for remembrance and the future.

With exhibitions, symposia, commemorative ceremonies and lectures, especially in schools, it reminds of all those involved in the resistance against National Socialism, be it Georg Elser, the White Rose, the Kreisau Circle, the Rote Kapelle (Red Orchestra) or the military-civilian resistance, but also stands up for the rule and democracy, against all forms of terrorism. It is Julia Wagner here in Brussel, giving relevant and efficient support to our foundation; thank you, dear Julia!

Let's come to an end: What do the opinions, attitudes and actions of the people who opposed tyranny mean to us today?

I am convinced, that the first task for all Germans is not to forget the atrocities done by Germans and to remember the people killed by Germans beyond the war. Among them about 6 Million Jews.

We Germans owe this to those whom we – as a people – have murdered, including their families and owe it to future generations.

Stauffenberg says shortly before the 20th of July:

"It is time for something to be done now. But anyone, who dares to do something, must be aware that he will probably go down in German history as a traitor. But if he fails to do so, he will be a traitor to his own conscience."

It is the thoughts of the resistance fighters – and not only their actions – that give strength to posterity: to articulate our own opinion, to stand tall, to take up controversial questions, and ultimately to take on our own responsibility.

Today's generations of Germans are not responsible for the Nazi crimes.
But they are responsible, that they will never happen again in Germany.

Therefore we must be vigilant, recognize right-wing populist and anti-Semitic tendencies at the earliest stage and defend ourselves and our children and friends, talk to them, enlighten them, and prepare ourselves for discussions. We have to make our children and ourselves fit for those thoughts and discussions. And, if I may say, this cannot be limited to Germany alone!

The thoughts expressed by conspirators can be comfort, guidance and support, just as it was with our father: particularly the most marked saying in his little book: *"I fought a good fight, I finished the course, I kept faith"*.

On the occasion of a recent opening of a resistance exhibition in Berlin, a 17-year-old schoolgirl asked me: "What would you say to your father today if you met him?" I muttered something about "hugging" at the time; I couldn't say any more than that, I was so surprised by this question and moved by the idea of seeing my father.

Today I would say to my father: "You fought a good fight, and all your children and grandchildren are grateful to you".

And I add, dear ladies and gentlemen, that all those who took part in the resistance against the murderous regime, fought - each in their own way - a good fight.

And that is why "being vigilant" and resisting xenophobic or even anti-Semitic tendencies is the greatest expression of gratitude, that we owe today to those who were involved in the resistance then.

Coming to the very end I would like to offer you a verse, written by Gerty Spies, a German Holocaust survivor:

She wrote:

“Was ist des Unschuldigen Schuld?

Wo beginnt sie?

Sie beginnt da,

Wo er gelassen mit hängenden Armen

Schulterzuckend daneben steht,

Den Mantel zuknöpft, die Zigarette

Anzündet und spricht:

Da kann man nichts machen.

Seht, da beginnt des Unschuldigen Schuld”.