

# TO ACT OR NOT TO ACT?

*As Nazi persecutions of Jews increased, Jews turned to their neighbors and friends for help. But many turned a blind eye to Jews' troubles or even turned them in. Others were disturbed by Nazi treatment of the Jews but felt there was little they could do. Historians still debate how much ordinary Germans and citizens in German-occupied countries knew and to what extent they, too, bear responsibility for the Holocaust. Millions remained silent bystanders. Only a few took action and bravely resisted.*

## BYSTANDER

### Staying Silent

Ines Lyss, a member of Hitler Youth, witnessed Nazi persecutions in her city and recalls how Jews vanished from her life.

*We knew Jews. My mother had worked for Jews during the First World War. Our doctor was Jewish. We weren't allowed to go to him anymore. . . . This Jewish doctor in Hamburg told my father in 1936, 'I know you can't come to me anymore, but if you need me, I'll come to you. And you won't have to pay me.' Then we heard that he had been charged with Rassenschande [racial pollution] and sent to jail. And after making a few inquiries, we found out that the entire family had disappeared. Naturally, we asked ourselves where they could be, but where could we have gone to find out?*

*Of course, we willingly believed that these [concentration camps] were protective custody camps and nothing else. It was just impossible to believe that people could be so evil and cruel. No one really believed it. . . . You tend anyway to pretty much go along with the crowd. You believe certain things because you want to believe them, you want to be able to sleep at night. And I have to admit honestly that I'm glad that I didn't know anything.*

## RESISTERS

### The White Rose

**How a group of college students in Nazi Germany risked their lives to defy Hitler's rule**

**O**n February 18, 1943, two students at the University of Munich were arrested and taken into police custody.

Hans Scholl, 24, and his sister Sophie, 21, were members of the White Rose, an underground anti-Nazi resistance group founded in 1942 by a handful of students at the University of Munich. By distributing anti-Nazi leaflets across Germany, the group hoped to rouse people to action against Hitler's totalitarian Nazi regime.

#### Phone Booths & Secret Couriers

In Nazi Germany, anyone accused of opposing the Nazis risked arrest by the Gestapo (the secret state police) who didn't hesitate to execute their opponents or send them to concentration camps. Under these circumstances, most Germans didn't attempt open defiance.

But some did. Hans and Sophie Scholl are the best-known members of the White Rose. Both had enthusiastically joined Hitler Youth as kids but went

on to reject Nazism once its true nature became clear. Hans and other founding White Rose members were medical students. They often met to discuss poetry and philosophy, as well as their opposition to the Nazi regime. When the students heard about Hitler's killing program targeting the disabled, as well as escalating violence against Jews, they decided it was time to act.

The White Rose operated in secret locations across Munich, in apartments and inns, on campus, and in a borrowed painter's studio. There, they wrote anti-Nazi tracts and printed thousands of copies using a hand-cranked duplicating machine. Then, they mailed them to professors and fellow students. Through a system of couriers, they also left leaflets in public places like phone booths and university campuses across Germany.

The leaflets urged resistance against the Nazis and alerted Germans to Nazi atrocities, incorporating quotes from poets and philosophers. In one leaflet,

White Rose: ©alg-imager / Wittenstein / The Image Works; White Rose Leaflet: ©ulstein bild/The Granger Collection

## RESCUER Saved by Schindler

Oskar Schindler was the last person you'd predict would be a hero. A savvy businessman, he moved to Krakow in 1939 looking to make a profit. The German occupation of Poland offered Nazi Party members like Schindler many opportunities. Schindler was able to take over factories confiscated from Jews and become rich using cheap Jewish slave labor. But Schindler was shocked by the violent treatment of Jews that he saw in the Krakow ghetto and the nearby Plaszow concentration camp.

Schindler became devoted to his Jewish employees and protected them from deportation to Auschwitz. He spent the fortune he had made on bribes and other tactics to keep his workers alive, even persuading the Nazis to let him run his factory as a sub-camp so he could keep employees safe. Ultimately, he saved the lives of more than 1,000 Jews. When asked why he took these actions at such great risk to himself, he said, "a thinking man who had overcome his inner cowardice simply had to help. There was no other choice."



Oskar Schindler (second from right) reunites with some of the Jews he saved.

### REFLECTION

Consider each story. Why do you think each of these individuals made the choice to resist or not to resist? What impact did their actions have?



Sophie sees off her brother Hans (left) and Christoph Probst (right), called up to be medics in 1942. En route to the Russian front, they stopped in Warsaw and were shocked by its ghetto. This experience spurred the group's distribution of leaflets, two of which are shown above (inset).

the group wrote, "Since the conquest of Poland, 300,000 Jews have been murdered in this country in the most bestial way. Here we see the most frightful crime against human dignity, a crime that is unparalleled in the whole of history."

### Caught in the Act

Though White Rose members wrote and distributed some of their tracts without incident, the Gestapo began to closely monitor student activities. Sophie felt an ever-tightening net around the White Rose. "Trust in other people has to give way to suspicion and watchfulness. Oh, it's exhausting and discouraging," she wrote.

That February, the group's curtain of secrecy was torn open by a spontaneous act. After distributing leaflets in a building at the University of Munich, Hans and Sophie realized they had copies left in their suitcase. When students

were about to change classes, Sophie flung the remaining copies in the air from the second floor of the atrium, showering the floor below with the leaflets. A janitor saw them and informed the Gestapo, who took the Scholls into custody.

Four days later, after interrogations and a short public trial, the Scholls and fellow White Rose member Christoph Probst were found guilty of treason and sentenced to death. They were executed that same day. Three more White Rose members were later executed.

Elisabeth Hartnagel, one of the Scholls' sisters, later explained her siblings' motivations and sacrifice. "I think it was sympathy in the best sense of the word. Sympathy for the oppressed. And reaching a point where you cannot stand by and watch. It was the human thing to do."

—Robert K. Elder