

# Sophie Scholl and the White Rose

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At the age of 21, Sophie Scholl was executed by the People's Court in Germany on Feb. 22, 1943, during the Holocaust, for her involvement in The White Rose, an organization that was secretly writing pamphlets calling for the end of the war and strongly denouncing the inhuman acts of the Nazis.

In May, 1942 German troops were on the battlefields of Russia and North Africa, while students at the University of Munich attended salons sharing their love of medicine, Theology, and philosophy and their aversion to the Nazi regime. Hans Scholl, Alexander Schmorell, and Sophie Scholl were at the center of this group of friends.

Attending the same university were two medical students, Willi Graf and Jurgen Wittgenstein, who had served in a military hospital in 1939, with Hans, Sophie's older brother. Along with Christoph Probst, a married soldier and father of three, they eventually joined The White Rose.

Sophie Scholl was born on May 9, 1921, in Forchtenberg am Kocher, where her father Robert Scholl, was mayor. At 12 Sophie joined the Hitler Youth, but became disillusioned. The arrest of her father for referring to Hitler as "God's Scourge," to an employee, left a strong impression on her.

To the Scholl family loyalty meant obeying the dictates of the heart. "What I want for you is to live in uprightness and freedom of spirit, no matter how difficult that proves to be," her father told the family.

When the mass deportation of Jews began in 1942, Sophie, Hans, Alexander and Jurgen realized it was time for action. They bought a typewriter and a duplicating machine and Hans and Alex wrote the first leaflet with the heading: Leaflets of The White Rose, which said:

"Nothing is so unworthy of a nation as allowing itself to be governed without opposition by a clique that has yielded to base instinct...Western civilization must defend itself against fascism and offer passive resistance, before the nation's last young man has given his blood on some battlefield."

Members of The White Rose worked day and night in secrecy, producing thousands of leaflets, mailed from undetectable locations in Germany, to scholars and medics. Sophie bought stamps and paper at different places, to divert attention from their activities.

In 1933 Hitler was elected chancellor of Germany. Many Germans who were uncomfortable with the anti-Semitic ranting of the Nazi party, appreciated Hitler's ability to bolster pride in a shamed nation.

The second White Rose leaflet stated: "Since the conquest of Poland 300,000 Jews have been murdered, a crime against human dignity...Germans encourage fascist criminals if no chord within them cries out at the sight of such deeds. An end in terror is preferable to terror without end."

Sophie's brother Hans spent two years in the military, studied medicine at the University of Munich, and was a medic at the Eastern front with Alex, Willi and Jurgen in 1942.

Jurgen transported stacks of pamphlets to Berlin. The journey was dangerous," Trains were crawling with military police. If you were a civilian and couldn't prove you'd been deferred, you were taken away immediately," he recalled.

No one in the United States can comprehend what it is to live under absolute dictatorship. The party controlled the news media, police, armed forces, judiciary system, communications, education, cultural and religious institutions.

The third leaflet demanded:" Sabotage in armament plants, newspapers, public ceremonies, and of the National Socialist Party...Convince the lower classes of the senselessness of continuing the war; where we face spiritual enslavement at the hands of National Socialists."

The Nuremberg Laws of 1935 had demanded expulsion of anyone who was not Aryan, declaring Jews as non-citizens. The international press had begun to report beatings in the streets, so Hitler moved the arena of cruelty away from cities to concentration camps.

On November 9, 1938, 30,000 Jews were beaten and arrested, and Storm Troops burned 191 synagogues on Kristallnacht," the night for the broken windows," causing 200,000 Jews to flee to the countryside.

When Alexander Schmorell was asked to swear an oath to Hitler, he asked to be discharged from the army. Willi Graf turned to passive resistance like the rest, after serving as a medical orderly in Yugoslavia. He was assigned to the Second Student's Company in Munich, where he met Sophie, Hans, Alexander, Christoph, and Jurgen.

Christoph Probst was the only member of the White Rose who was married with children, so the others tried to protect him. In the fourth leaflet they wrote: "I ask you as a Christian whether you hesitate in hope that someone else will raise his arm

in your defense?...For Hitler and his followers no punishment is commensurate with their crimes.”

After the German defeat at Stalingrad, in 1943, and Roosevelt’s demand for unconditional surrender for the Axis powers, an Allied invasion was weeks away. That night, Hans, Willi, and Alex painted” Freedom” and” Down with Hitler,” and drew crossed-out swastikas on buildings in Munich.

Their philosophy professor, Kurt Huber, was shocked when he learned of the state-organized atrocities committed in Germany, and he worked on the final White Rose leaflets. He was also motivated to lecture on forbidden subjects, such as the writings of the Jewish philosopher Spinoza.

Each leaflet was more critical of Hitler and the German people than the last. The fifth mentioned: ”Hitler is leading the German people into the abyss. Blindly they follow their seducers into ruin...Are we to be forever a nation which is hated and rejected by all mankind?”

The Gestapo had been looking for the pamphlets’ authors as soon as the first ones appeared. As the language in the leaflets became more inflammatory they stepped up their efforts. They arrested people at the slightest hint of suspicion.

Sophie and Hans brought a suitcase of the final leaflets, written by Professor Huber, to the University, and left them in corridors for the students to discover and read.

Jakob Schmidt, University handyman and Nazi party member, saw Hans and Sophie with the leaflets and reported them. They were taken into Gestapo custody. Sophie’s ‘interrogation’ was so cruel, she appeared in court with a broken leg.

On Feb 22, 1943, Sophie, Hans and Christoph were condemned to death by the ‘People’s’ Court, which had been created by the National Socialist Party to eliminate Hitler’s enemies.

Hans Scholl’s last words shouted from the guillotine were,” Long live freedom!” In an unprecedented action by the guards, Christoph Probst was allowed a few moments alone with Hans and Sophie before they went to their deaths. After months of Gestapo interrogations to obtain the names of his co-conspirators, Willi was executed. His final thoughts were:” They shall continue what we have begun.”

Alexander Schmorell was arrested in an air raid shelter and executed at Munich Stadelheim. Kurt Huber became one of the defendants at the trial of the People’s Court against the White Rose. Survivors remember Huber’s last words, an affirmation of humaneness.

Jurgen Wittenstein was interrogated by the Gestapo, but they couldn't prove his involvement so they let him go. He got himself transferred to the front, beyond Nazi control and was the only one to survive. After the war, he relocated to the United States, became a doctor and received an award from the Government of West Germany for his bravery.

"How can we expect righteousness to prevail when there is hardly anyone willing to give himself up individually to a righteous cause," Sophie said. "Such a fine, sunny day, and I have to go," she continued, "but what does my death matter, if through us thousands of people are awakened and stirred to action?"

The White Rose is a radiant page in the annals of the 20th Century. The courage to swim against the stream of public opinion, even when doing so was equated with treason, and the conviction that death is not too great a price to pay for following the whisperings of the conscience," writes Chris Zimmerman in *The White Rose: Its Legacy and Challenge*.

Two hundred German schools are named for the Scholls, and politicians such as former New York Mayor David Dinkins invoke their names, and visit their graves. With the rise of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and violence against foreigners in Germany, the anniversary of the executions is a powerful reminder.

Sophie Scholls sister Inge Aicher-Scoll wrote: "Perhaps genuine heroism lies in deciding to stubbornly defend the everyday things, the mundane and the immediate."

The final leaflet, though undelivered by the White Rose, found its way to the resistance, and was carried to Sweden. From there it was placed into the hands of the British, who made thousands and thousands of copies. As their bombers flew over Germany, the letters were dropped all over the country. The truth could not be hidden.

### **Reflection**

How willing are we to stand up for truth, even if it means sacrifice? What are some of the issues in today's society that require Christians to stand up for the truth?