

The Woman Who Wouldn't Heil Hitler

Susan Verstraete

The first time young Kurt Ziefle said "Heil Hitler" to his mother, he wished he hadn't. Maria Ziefle calmly and firmly laid down the rule of the household. "We do not salute man in place of God," she said. "In this house we will continue to say 'Gross Gott' (may God greet you). Is that understood?" It was.

Maria's refusal to "Heil Hitler" in greeting was a dangerous stance in Germany in the late 1930's. It caused her neighbors and the Nazi authorities to look on her with suspicion. Nonetheless, Maria held firm. She nodded and smiled, and greeted her neighbors kindly, but never returned their salute or "Heil Hitler." In a way, it was symbolic of her determination not to be defined by her culture. Maria and her husband, Georg, were Christians first and patriots second, and although they loved Germany, there was no question—they would not conform to the demands of National Socialism.



But Maria never thought of herself as anyone special. She was just an average woman, raising a small family with her husband in the little village of Sontheim. Every morning she'd kiss her husband goodbye as he went to work. She got the children off to school and then walked to the market to complete the daily shopping. On Sundays, the family attended the Protestant church and an evangelical fellowship. Her life was routine and full of simple pleasures—a full soup pot, happy children playing in the yard, and crisp, ironed curtains blowing in the breeze.

But that was before Hitler came to power. His Nazi regime was beginning to affect every aspect of daily life. First, Jewish-owned stores were boycotted, then Jewish friends began disappearing from the neighborhood. Religious instruction in the schools was replaced with classes of Nazi propaganda. Georg and Maria watched these gradual changes with alarm. Like many parents today, they wondered how they could protect their family from the darkness of their culture.

Trusting God. Maria's children didn't always share her ideals. When the Nazi authorities demanded that all the young men attend *Jungvolk* rallies instead of Sunday morning worship, Maria's older son stood the test. But her younger son, Kurt, failed. Smitten by the power available to him as a member of the Nazi party, he quit attending church. Maria prayed for Kurt, and trusted that God would open his eyes, but allowed him to do as his own conscience dictated.

Prayer. It almost goes without saying that Maria prayed for her children. In fact, she seemed to pray without ceasing! Several times a day, she asked the Father to keep her family's faith strong and to give them courage to follow Christ when their friends, neighbors and government didn't. She prayed for their pastor, asking God to help him both to keep his integrity and to avoid arrest. She even prayed for his persecutors: "Be merciful to the Nazis, for they do not even realize their insanity . . ." As the war progressed, she prayed for protection from nightly air raids and for the safety of their two oldest sons, who were drafted into the army. And she prayed for Georg, whose work as an ambulance driver kept him away for weeks at time.

Family worship. Even when Georg was away from the family, Maria kept the routine of *Dammerstunde* (family worship) knowing that her children needed the instruction and encouragement of God's Word more than ever before. Her gifted story-telling made it a daily event that everyone in the household looked forward to. She might tell a Bible story in a way that had the children on the edge of their seats from start to finish, or use a German story of moral courage to illustrate a biblical concept. Maria's stories gave her children models of heroes who stood for God and against their culture, just as they would be required to do.

Thankfulness. Throughout the war, Maria was able to see God's hand at work and pointed out His blessings to the children. Her painful phlebitis was a blessing because it excused her from being drafted in the desperate push near the end of the war. Kurt was injured in an air raid, which was a blessing because his injury kept him away from the front lines, where he almost surely would have been killed. Maria expressed gratitude for the beautiful spring flowers and other delights of nature, and praised God openly for each provision of food and shelter.

During the course of war, Maria saw many Christian families torn apart. Good men were imprisoned, and God-fearing women died in air raids. Teens' hearts were turned away from God and even little children suffered. But because of God's grace and the extraordinary faithfulness of an ordinary woman, Maria's entire family was eventually reunited, and their faith did hold firm. God used two near-death experiences to soften Kurt's heart and bring him to faith in Christ. God used Georg to save many lives as an ambulance driver. Reinhold, the oldest son, was sustained as a prisoner of war. The younger children, Ruth and Helmut, had a strong foundation of faith built into their lives through their experiences. God had answered all of Maria's prayers for her family.

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