

Magdalena Reuter RG-50.028.0051

Summary of Interview

Magdalena Reuter (née Kusserow) born January 23, 1924, in Bochum, Westphalia, Germany. Father: Franz Kusserow, born in Posen, Germany (Polish: Poznań). Mother: Hilda Kusserow (née **Eichhorst**). Older siblings: Annemarie, Wilhelm, Siegfried, Karl-Heinz, Waltraud, Hildegard, Wolfgang. Younger siblings: Elisabeth, Hans-Werner, Paul-Gerhard.

Franz worked in the post office after being wounded in the military during World War I. In 1924, Franz and Hilda became Jehovah's Witnesses after attending a public talk and studying with the Witnesses in Bochum. In 1931, Franz took early retirement and the family moved to Bad Lippspringe because there were no Jehovah's Witnesses in the area. Their home became the area book depot, and Jehovah's Witness colporteurs (full-time preachers) would stay with them. The family regularly preached in the surrounding villages.

Magdalena recalled the police confiscating Witness literature from the family home. Later, Franz and Hilda were arrested for their preaching work. Several times, the family participated in letter-writing campaigns against Hitler's persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses. Magdalena and her sister Hildegard distributed the booklet *Crisis* by leaving them under the doormat of homes in Paderborn. Franz was incarcerated several times. Wilhelm was sent to prison and condemned to death for refusing to join the military. After his execution by firing squad, Franz was released so he could attend Wilhelm's burial. The burial was attended by 20-30 Jehovah's Witnesses, and afterwards, Franz returned to prison to finish his sentence.

In 1940 after Franz had been released from prison, he baptized Hildegard, Wolfgang and Magdalena as Jehovah's Witnesses. A short time later, police arrested Franz, Hilda and Hildegard; but not Magdalena because she was not yet 18 years old. The police later returned to arrest Magdalena after all. They beat her when she refused to reveal where the Witness literature was hidden in the family home. Although Magdalena was sent to Bielefeld prison, she was happy to be in the same prison as her mother and sister. Hilda was sentenced to two and a half years in prison, and a prison officer's wife kindly allowed Hilda, Hildegard and Magdalena to be together in one cell for three or four weeks. Magdalena was also able to visit her father in the prison. At that time, Waltraud and Annemarie worked in Berlin, Karl-Heinz was in prison, and the three youngest Kusserow children were in a children's home.

Hilda was sentenced to prison for two and a half years while Hildegard and Magdalena were in a separate prison for youths in Vechta. After six months, Magdalena completed her prison term, but before she was released, she was given a document to sign renouncing her faith. The prison officer cried when Magdalena explained to her that she would never sign such a document and that she would rather go to another prison than to deny her God. Magdalena was then taken to Bielefeld prison and again asked to sign a document renouncing her faith. One Gestapo officer said to the other officer that Magdalena is a Kusserow and she will not sign the document, and that she would rather be sent to a concentration camp and see her siblings or other Jehovah's Witnesses than renounce her faith. Magdalena spent four months there.

While in solitary confinement, Magdalena would repeat Bible texts and Witness songs she had memorised. She also went over Bible sermons in her mind. When the prison guard informed Magdalena that her sentence was nearly finished and she would be released, Magdalena said that she

probably would not be released because she would not sign the document renouncing her Witness faith and then she explained her beliefs to the prison guard.

When Magdalena was 18, she was transported to Ravensbrück concentration camp. The ten-day train journey was very difficult for her because she was grouped together with criminals and prostitutes and objected their conversations. She was actually relieved when they reached the concentration camp so that she could leave that group of women. At the camp, Magdalena discovered that the woman who was checking her for lice was one of Jehovah's Witnesses. Gertrude Poetzinger, another Witness, was in the same block and also befriended Magdalena.

Roll call at Ravensbrück started at four o'clock in the morning and could last anywhere from two to five hours. In wintertime, Magdalena's hands would freeze and swell up since prisoners were not allowed to warm their hands in their pockets during roll call. Magdalena worked in the garden with a group of other Jehovah's Witnesses. At six in the evening, prisoners were led back to the camp for the night. Towards the end of the war, many Polish people were sent to Ravensbrück. Magdalena recalled seeing female Polish prisoners laying down beneath a large Christmas tree to shield themselves from the cold while waiting to be registered. Some of them died there. Magdalena's sister Hildegard was also eventually sent to Ravensbrück. Once when Magdalena visited Hildegard in the camp hospital, she noticed that some of the Polish women patients had been subjected to various medical experiments. Hildegard was later transferred to another camp to work as a maid for a family.

In spite of the terrible things Magdalena witnessed, her faith in her God, Jehovah, and the Bible remained strong. Because she memorised Bible texts when she was at home with her parents, Magdalena and other Witness women were able to encourage one another by exchanging Bible texts during roll call.

Magdalena was in quarantine, sick with cholera, when her mother arrived at the camp and she was able to help Magdalena recuperate. Magdalena was later assigned to care for children of unmarried SS women in a kindergarten while Hilda worked in the camp post office and canteen. In 1945, as the end of the war approached, camp inmates were instructed to leave the camp. In the confusion during heavy bombing, Magdalena, Hilda and 20-25 other Witness women sheltered overnight in a nearby forest between the German and Russian armies. The following morning, they found that the SS had discarded their uniforms and fled. Russian soldiers asked who the women were, so a young woman who had become one of Jehovah's Witnesses while incarcerated in Ravensbrück translated for them, explaining that they had been prisoners in the concentration camp. Magdalena and her mother were 500 km from their home when they met a Jehovah's Witness who had worked on Dr. Felix Kersten's farm. The man invited all of the Witness women to stay at the farm where 20-30 Jehovah's Witness men worked, and they stayed there until they could return home.

Magdalena and her mother were the last family members to arrive home to a joyful reunion after the war. Magdalena later married and, together with her husband, did missionary work in Togo, Luxembourg and Spain.

Keywords and Subjects:

Topical Term

Bibelforscher

Conscientious objector

Declaration of renunciation

Holocaust survivors

Jehovah's Witnesses

Jehovah's Witnesses--Hidden literature

Jehovah's Witnesses--Poetzing, Gertrude

Geographic Name

Bielefeld (Prison)(Germany)

Dachau (Concentration camp)(Germany)

Vechta (Prison)(Germany)

Ravensbrück (Concentration camp)(Germany)