

### III – German Marists and World War II

#### In the School of the Cross. The German Marists 1933 to 1950

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More and more German institutions in society and church produce studies about the years from 1933 to the end of World War II. This contribution tries to summarize the fate of the Marist Fathers and Brothers of the German Province.<sup>1</sup>

At that time, there were five houses in the province: Meppen (1901), St. Olav (1922), Ahmsen (1923), Teterow (1929), and Fürstenzell (1931). The province counted 102 members: 42 priests, 36 coadjutor brothers and 24 scholastics. In addition, some German Marists were working in the Oceania Province.<sup>2</sup> St. Olav, a formation house, was in the Netherlands. This international mix caused many problems with the new regime. August Reyter (1886-1961), born in Lothringia, provincial in 1935, spoke about going through ‘the school of the cross’, when referring to the problems ahead. One fifth of the members, the younger generation, died during the War.

A future broader study would need to include all Marist provinces describing their fate and their links during the war years. For example, French Marists were in Germany for forced labour. German Marists in the army could visit Marists in other European countries.<sup>3</sup>

#### Sources and period of research

According to the provincial report for the general chapter of 1947 the German archives were either stolen or destroyed. Some documents survived in different countries and in the general archives in Rome. Franz Wieschemeyer, provincial, destroyed documents to avoid the secret service using material against the Marists. Communities stopped writing the house chronicle.<sup>4</sup> Marists censored their own writings as a safety measure. Many of the sources available are written in hindsight. Only the general administration could openly discuss the situation in Germany. However, they had to leave Rome and go to La Neylière in 1940. From then on communications between the superior general and the provincial were rare and difficult. The provincial was by himself in a most difficult time.

There is no history of the German Province. Publications for jubilees and magazines include summary articles. Material is kept in non-Marist archives. Secondary literature does not have many references.<sup>5</sup> The time of witnesses has now come to an end. This contribution hopes to recall what happened and what the German Marists went through.

The German Province was established by Pope Pius XI on 5 December 1923. It was hardly ten years on its own feet when the political situation changed dramatically against them. On 30 January 1933 Hitler legally became head of state of Germany. All Germans were bound to their

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<sup>1</sup> This is a summary of an extensive private study and dossier of original documents in German (2017) with more references, additional information, and discussion of events in greater detail. Copy with the author.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Boesch sm, *Ein Meilenstein am Wege der Gesellschaft Mariens (Maristen). Eine Jahrhundertschau zum Jubiläum 1836 - 1936*, Meppen, Verlag Kreuz und Caritas, 1936; Franz Wieschemeyer sm (ed.), *Geschichte der Gesellschaft Mariens*, Fürstenzell, 1939. The fate of the Marists in Oceania deserves its own study. For two examples see Alois Greiler sm (text) - Elizabeth Charlton (research), *From Samoa to Somes and back. The Internment of Father Albert Merten sm and Brother Joseph (Julius) Krieger sm during World War II*, in this volume; Alois Greiler sm, *Pater Wilhelm Weber*, in H. Moll (ed.), *Zeugen für Christus. Das deutsche Martyrologium des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Paderborn, Schöningh, 2 volumes, 1999, vol. 2, 1159-1161 (<sup>3</sup>2001).

<sup>3</sup> Marists and World War II: Philip Graystone sm, *A Short History of the Society of Mary 1854-1993*, Rome, 1998, p. 89-95; Pierre Martin sm, later bishop in Oceania, was in the Buchenwald concentration camp: Fr. Patrick ofm, *Bon pour... Buchenwald*, in *Missions des Iles* 11, 73 (1957) 26-27; see also *Le R.P. Raymond Pierrot (1902-1940). Un exemple – un sacrifice*, extrait du Bulletin « *Chez Nous* », Institution Saint-Joseph, Montluçon, 1941.

<sup>4</sup> Mertens, *Himmlers Klostersturm*, p. 39-45. The chronicle for Fürstenzell says nothing was written since 1937. Existing chronicles were hidden. Other houses were dissolved.

<sup>5</sup> Janik, *Klerus und Klöster des Bistums Passau im Dritten Reich*, p. 17.66-67, Fr. Falke; Neuhäusler, *Kreuz und Hakenkreuz*, p. 153 [[www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org) 6.3.2012]; Id., *Saat des Bösen*, p. 78.

legal government. The Second World War ended for Germany officially on 8 May 1945. I include references to the immediate post-war situation. This makes it a period from 1933 to 1950. As it happened, both years were celebrated as a ‚holy year‘.

We need to remember two previous experiences marking the overall feelings. After the *Kulturkampf* in the Bismarck-era, German Catholics were under pressure to show loyalty to their state. And, the German Marists had just survived the First World War. Many of the confreres had been soldiers and some were to become soldiers again.

A mention must be made about Franz Justus von Rarkowski (1873-1950).<sup>6</sup> He joined the Marists in 1891. After teaching in Differt and Meppen, he left the Society in 1901 and returned to his home diocese, on the border to Russia. His experience of living next to Russia made him very nationalistic. He was a military chaplain during World War I and continued as chaplain in the army newly established by the Hitler-government. Pius XI appointed him ordinary of the military in 1938. Rarkowski was due to retire a year later. The German army pressed for a renewal although the bishops' conference was against it.<sup>7</sup> Rarkowski said later: „I know that others condemn my position. What am I supposed to do? If I resist I have no influence at all. This way I can try to prevent some of the bad things.“<sup>8</sup>

### 1933 to 1941: mounting conflicts between church and state

Before 1933 the extreme right wing parties played minor roles in the political landscapes where Marist houses were situated. These mainly Catholic areas would hold to the *Zentrumspartei*. This changed after January of 1933. More and more the churches faced difficulties in the new Germany.<sup>9</sup> Initially many Germans thought the Hitler-government would pass quickly like many other democratically elected governments in the previous years. Political violence raged more before 1933 than later and this was credited to the new leadership. Many steered clear of politics struggling with unemployment and the effects of the worldwide economic crisis. The burden of the Treaty of Versailles gave rise to strong national emotions. Hitler confirmed that Christianity was important for the new state. The pastoral letter of the German bishops of 29 March 1933 therefore exhorted Catholics, to be loyal to the legal authority and to fulfil carefully obligations as citizens'. Gradually the new government began to establish an authoritarian regime. In June and July 1933 all other parties were forbidden, including the *Zentrumspartei*, the party supported by the Catholic Church. The Concordat with the Holy See of 20 July 1933 created the illusion of reconciliation and safety.<sup>10</sup> In 1933, the Catholic Church celebrated the 1900th anniversary of the death of Christ. In Germany the pilgrimage to the Holy Shroud at Trier also expressed thanks for the concordat. In 1934, the Capuchin friar Konrad of Parzham, Passau diocese, was canonized. One could read a political dimension into this. Against the image of the new Aryan German, blond and blue-eyed, the pope made the humble friar serving the poor a model for the Germans. From 20 August 1934 on, soldiers had to make their oath to the person of the *Führer* Adolf Hitler. On 16 March 1935, general conscription was introduced. Between 1935 and 1945 there were about 18 Million Germans in the different branches of the military, including most of the younger Marists. Catholics were obliged to be loyal to their government. The close identity of government with the Nazi-ideology of the Hitler party only gradually came to be realized.

<sup>6</sup> Monika Sinderhauf, *Katholische Wehrmachtseelsorge im Krieg. Quellen und Forschungen zu Franz Justus Rarkowski und Georg Werthmann*, in Karl-Joseph Hummel/Christoph Kösters (eds.), *Kirchen im Krieg. Europa 1939-1945*, Paderborn, Schöningh, 2010, 265-292; Heinrich Misalla, ‚Der Feldbischof Franz Justus Rarkowski‘, in Id., *Wie der Krieg zur Schule Gottes wurde. Hitlers Feldbischof Rarkowski. Eine notwendige Erinnerung*, Publik-Forum Buch, 1997, p. 14-16.

<sup>7</sup> Leugers, *Mauer*, p. 60.

<sup>8</sup> Quote in *Militärseelsorge*, p. 639.

<sup>9</sup> Strohm, *Die Kirchen im Dritten Reich*, and Wurster, *Das Bistum Passau im Dritten Reich*, 389-406; Eike Lossin, *Katholische Geistliche in nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslagern. Frömmigkeit zwischen Anpassung, Befehl und Widerstand*, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Thies Schulze, *Spielräume und Zwangslagen vatikanischer Politik. Zum Reichskonkordat, 80 Jahre nach der Unterzeichnung*, in *Stimmen der Zeit* 138, 7 (2013) 457- 468. The concordat is still valid today!

French Marists working in Germany had to leave the country. The provincial, August Reyter, left in 1934, first for St. Olav, then for France. From 6 to 8 July 1935, the provincial chapter met in St. Olav. Reyter recommended to follow the interior path, the spiritual life in order to suffer through the ‚school of the cross‘ he saw arising:<sup>11</sup>

„We are pushed in this direction by the circumstances of our time. The outward success of our mission is more and more blocked. More and more we are unable to save souls and to renew the world. And, the cross of discrimination and persecution begins to show forth. What is God’s purpose with all this? Nothing else but to bring us back to the inner life and then to Himself. As always, when God tried humanity, he calls them into the school of the cross“.

The chapter urged the priests who were teachers to gain approval by the state otherwise the Marist school in Meppen would not survive. In his report for the next general chapter Reyter wrote about the real possibility of a persecution.

For 1936 the Marists had in mind to celebrate the centenary of the approbation of the Society of Mary as well as the centenary of their Oceania mission. All this was overshadowed by the growing tensions. The general council discussed the situation in the province for example on 17 April 1936. They decided to appoint a German provincial instead of a foreigner. Heinrich Wolterkessen (1891-1963) and Franz Wieschemeyer (1896-1991) were the candidates. Fr Wilhelm Schaefer (1879-1944), a New Zealander and assistant general, was just back from a visitation of the province. Wieschemeyer became provincial in this tense time (de facto 1935, officially from 1937, until November 1946).

The Olympic Games of 1936 brought a brief respite and a continuation of the illusion of peace and order. But soon after began a campaign against the churches. Religious congregations were targeted in public court cases and campaigns in the media accused of indecent behaviour and sexual assaults.<sup>12</sup> The bishops intervened in support of the religious. In July 1937, for the pilgrimage to Aachen, 800 000 people came – many more than expected. This was taken as a sign of growing distrust between Catholics and present government. Already by now some bishops said clearly that this is time of life or death for the church: They want to destroy us. However, the episcopacy was split and this prevented a common resistance of all Catholics.<sup>13</sup> The public reading of the encyclical of Pius XI, *Mit brennender Sorge*, (21 March 1937) revealed the rupture. Towards the end of that year, Wieschemeyer carried out a visitation of all the houses. In spite of the concordat, religious were not exempt from military service. The general council in Rome noted: „The government interprets the concordat in its own way“ (18 May 1937).

In the Emsland, the area where Meppen and Ahmsen were situated, the Catholics found consolation in reported appearances of Our Lady in the village of Heede (Spring 1937 to November 1940). The Secret Security Police (*Gestapo*) complained: The Emsland people, through habit, education, and genetics are servile towards the Church. It will take generations to convince them about the ideas of the new Germany.<sup>14</sup> In 1938, a secret issue of the secret service said about the fight against religious:<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> „Dazu drängen uns auch mit Gewalt die Zeitumstände. Die rein äusserlichen Erfolge unseres Wirkens werden mehr und mehr gehemmt. Mehr und mehr erweisen sie sich auch als unzulänglich für die Rettung der Seelen und die Erneuerung der Welt. Dazu steigt das Kreuz der Verachtung und Verfolgung vor uns auf. Was bezweckt Gott mit diesen Dingen, die auch er kennt und zulässt? Nichts anderes, als uns zu uns selbst zurückzuführen und dann zu sich. Wie immer, wenn er die Menschheit heimsuchen wollte, ruft er sie in die Kreuzesschule.“

<sup>12</sup> Hans Günter Hockerts, *Die Sittlichkeitsprozesse gegen katholische Ordensangehörige und Priester 1936/37. Eine Studie zur nationalsozialistischen Herrschaftstechnik und zum Kirchenkampf* (Veröffentlichungen der Kommission für Zeitgeschichte. Reihe B: Forschungen, Band VI), Düsseldorf, 1971.

<sup>13</sup> Hubert Wolf, „Wechsel in der Kampfpraxis“? 75 Jahre nach der Enzyklika „Mit brennender Sorge“, in *Stimmen der Zeit* 137, 4 (2012) 241-253, quote p. 243. Neuhäusler, *Saat*, p. 19: Pius XI said Christmas 1937 before the college of cardinals, ‚in Deutschland besteht wirklich eine religiöse Verfolgung‘.

<sup>14</sup> Quote in *Jahrbuch des Emsländischen Heimatbundes*, volume 45, 1999, p. 143.

<sup>15</sup> *Der Nationalsozialismus. Dokumente 1933-1945*, ed. Walther Hofer, Fischer Taschenbuchverlag, <sup>2</sup>1978 (1977), [86] p. 156: „...Die Orden sind der militante Arm der katholischen Kirche. Sie müssen daher von ihren Einflugsgebieten zurückgedrängt, eingeeignet und schließlich vernichtet werden... Für umfassendere Maßnahmen

„...Religious congregations are the militant arm of the Catholic Church. Therefore, they must be pushed back, narrowed down, and finally destroyed from their areas of influence... For more radical measures against the religious the field must be prepared by more propaganda...“

February 1939, Ernest Rieu (1868-1953), superior general, celebrated his golden jubilee as a Marist. Wieschemeyer was present and could surely share about the situation.<sup>16</sup>

On 29 September 1940, the ministry for labour issued a rule which practically made it impossible for Germans younger than 50 years to join a religious congregation.<sup>17</sup> This hit the congregations to the core, not only for their province but also for the foreign missions at the time still strongly depending on vocations from Europe. The national conference of religious superiors in Germany dissolved in 1941. They gave way to political pressure and hoped to continue their work on a regional level.<sup>18</sup>

All this threw Catholics into conflicts of conscience between legitimate government, persecution of their Church, worry about their own life and the life of their relatives, worries about those in military service, the rumours about the fate of the Jews and of prisoners of war. Many parish priests tried to survive with compromises. They followed the general line of the head of the bishops' conference, Cardinal Bertram of Breslau, who thought negotiations are the best way in this time.

With the beginning of the war in 1939, the persecutions intensified. The SS organized the fight and final destruction of its opponents. This affected the Jews and other racially persecuted groups, but also the churches. Hanna Arendt wrote:<sup>19</sup>

„There were two categories of opponents or ‚enemies of the state‘. Two departments were responsible to fight those. Referat IV-A was about communism, sabotage, liberalism, or assassinations; Referat IV-B dealt with ‚sects‘, Lutherans, Catholics, Freemasons, and Jews. Adolf Eichmann was head of sub-section IV-B-4, Juden“.

## The German Marist communities 1939 to 1945

### *Meppen and Ahmsen until the expulsion in May 1941*

The Emsland area was a strongly Catholic area with a dominance of the Catholic Church in private and political life. They had now to follow the guidelines of the new Germany, in the media, with Hitler-speeches on the radio, donating for collections of the government for the war. On 28 May 1934, Meppen (8.500 inhabitants) organized a huge celebration of the Christian faith as an antidote. The Nazis initiated trouble around the gathering. A neighbour of the Marist house was the county leader of the Nazi-party, Joseph Eggert (1896-1960), born a Catholic. After failing to find a job, he made a party career. His sister Apollonia, a former nun, and his brother Philipp, were zealous National socialists like himself and dominated events in Meppen. After the war he was sentenced to prison, but his weak health saw him leave prison early. Eggert led a court case against the Marists because his dog drowned in a well belonging to the Marists.<sup>20</sup>

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auf dem Gebiete des Ordenswesens muß der Boden erst propagandistisch noch mehr vorbereitet werden...“. See Arnold Angenendt, *Heilige und Reliquien*, München, C.H.Beck, <sup>2</sup>1997 (1994), 316-317: „In den zahlreichen Berichten der Geheimen Staatspolizei über die [katholische] Kirche tritt sie übereinstimmend als der gefährlichste Gegner hervor, den die nationalsozialistische Herrschaft noch nicht bezwungen hatte“.

<sup>16</sup> *Cinquantenaire de Profession du T.R.P. Rieu, supérieur général de la Société de Marie, 2 février 1939*, Rom.

<sup>17</sup> Neuhäusler, *Saat*, p. 76-77.

<sup>18</sup> Karl Josef Rivinius svd, *Zur Geschichte der „Vereinigung Deutscher Ordensobern“*, in *Ordenskorrespondenz* 40, 2 (1999) 226-234, here p. 231-232.

<sup>19</sup> Hanna Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem. Ein Bericht von der Banalität des Bösen*, München-Zürich, Piper, <sup>6</sup>2013, p. 151: „Es gab zwei Kategorien von Gegner oder „Staatsfeinden“, deren Behandlung zwei verschiedenen Referenten zugeeilt war; Referat IV-A befaßte sich mit „Gegnern“, die wegen Kommunismus, Sabotage, Liberalismus oder wegen Attentaten zu verfolgen waren, und Referat IV-B befaßte sich mit „Sekten“, mit Protestanten und Katholiken, mit Freimaurern und mit Juden.“ Adolf Eichmann leitete die Unterabteilung IV-B-4, ‚Juden‘.

<sup>20</sup> Heinz Kleene, Helmut Lensing, *Eggert, Joseph Konrad*, in *Emsländische Geschichte*, volume 15, Haselünne, Eigenverlag, 2008, p. 341-373. The *Jahrbücher des Emsländischen Heimatbundes* offer much material.

The Emsland is known for many labour camps. The official media presented those as well-deserved punishment for criminals and underlined their contribution to cultivate new farming land in the bogs.<sup>21</sup>

Another series of public court cases and campaigns against religious followed. This time the reason was religious smuggling money out of the country. Rieu visited Germany in 1934 and could experience this. The Marists had their mission office in Meppen and transferred, like other missionary congregations, money to their foreign missions, often through the Dutch Universum-Bank. The new government financial regulations declared all this illegal. Religious lost their status as charities and taxes and tariffs were raised immensely.<sup>22</sup> Universum-offices in Dortmund were searched in March 1935 and documents concerning religious were confiscated. The result was a general search of religious houses that month.<sup>23</sup> The Marist house in Meppen was searched on 8 April 1935. The Fathers had to hand over all passports. The Marists were evaluated as politically unreliable. Maria Zumholz, who did much research on Catholics in the area, wrote:<sup>24</sup>

„The mission house in Meppen was searched on 8 April 1935 by the Gestapo... In the library they found different books with a content hostile to the State and confiscated them.“

The case against the Marists and some other congregations was eventually given up. However, some religious were put into prison. Bishop Legge, Meissen, was sentenced in November 1935. Reyter had helped him to bring money across the border and had also helped a young man to flee who was politically persecuted (general council, 17 April 1936).<sup>25</sup>

In 1935, the government introduced obligatory labour service (*Reichsarbeitsdienst* or RAD). One camp was at Ahmsen.<sup>26</sup> Also religious had to do these months of obligatory labour for the state.

For 30 May 1935, a big festival about foreign missions was planned in Osnabrück. Bishop Wilhelm Berning (1877-1955), the resident bishop, complained about short-term interventions to block the event. One of the invited bishops was Marist Thomas Wade from Bougainville. He used his stay to visit the Marists in Meppen.<sup>27</sup>

Fathers Josef Bösch (1880-1961), military chaplain in World War I, and Peter Düren (1880-1954), both from Meppen, were observed by the Gestapo Osnabrück. Bösch travelled as preacher of home missions, and Düren was curate in Teglingen near Meppen. The Gestapo reports said their activities would undermine programs offered by the Nazi-Party. In 1937, Gerd Hebbelmann (1906-1987), Meppen, was in prison for three days. The vicar general intervened on his behalf and Hebbelmann could return.<sup>28</sup>

From 1936, all youth had to join the *Hitlerjugend*. The boarders in Meppen were allowed to do so in the hope of rescuing the boarding school from closure. The superior tried to negotiate that this would not prevent the boys from going to school and Sunday mass. The older pupils had to join the *Reichsarbeitsdienst*. All pleas that foreign missionaries would promote German culture in other countries were of no avail. On Christmas Eve 1938, the superior of Meppen was informed that the school had to close on 1 April 1939. This was against the concordat which had

<sup>21</sup> Gymnasium Marianum Meppen, *Die nationalsozialistische Machtergreifung im Raume Meppen*, Broschüre des Leistungskurses Geschichte, 1993 (copies of original documents).

<sup>22</sup> ABP, OA, NS, IX: Klöster und Orden, *Osterhofener-Zeitung*, 4.10.1934. Fürstzell repaid taxes until 1942.

<sup>23</sup> Rapp, *Devisenprozesse*, p. 355.

<sup>24</sup> Franz-Josef Licher sm, *Die Vertreibung durch die Nationalsozialisten*, in *100 Jahre freie katholische Schulen in Meppen*, Meppen, 1996, 18-22 (also: *Festschrift 100 Jahre Maristen*, 50-56). Maria Anna Zumholz, *Anpassung – Verweigerung – Widerstand*, in *Emsländische Geschichte*, volume 13, 2006, 22-104, here p. 45-47. Anton Scheper sm, *Die Maristen-Missionsschule St. Josef in Meppen*, in *Festschrift zur 600Jahrfeier der Stadt Meppen*, Meppen, 1960.

<sup>25</sup> Background: Mertens, *Klostersturm*, p. 55-57.

<sup>26</sup> Heinrich Gertken, *Der Reichsarbeitsdienst*, in Gemeinde Lähden (ed.), *Holte. Geschichte eines alten Kirchspiels*, 1995, p. 518-527.

<sup>27</sup> Lagebericht der Staatspolizeistelle Osnabrück an das Geheime Staatspolizeiamt für die Monate April und Mai 1935 vom 5. Juni 1935, *Gestapo Osnabrück*, p. 171-172. Wade: Fotoalbum Archive House Meppen.

<sup>28</sup> *Priester unter Hitlers Terror*, Spalte 1093, Falke (Bistum Passau), and Spalte 907, Hebbelmann (Bistum Osnabrück; dort ‚Georg‘ (sic)).

guaranteed the existence of religious schools. Supported by the major superiors of Germany and Bishop Wilhelm Berning, the Marist superior and others in this situation protested but to no avail.

The provincial chapter of August 1939 discussed finances. They were seriously afraid of a public court case as there was a second wave of court cases 1937-1942.<sup>29</sup>

The next blow came with the prohibition to publish the missionary magazine of the province, *Kreuz und Caritas*, in September 1939.<sup>30</sup>

The final blow came with the *Klostersturm*, the open attack and confiscation of religious houses in Germany and Austria 1940 and 1941. A law of 1 September 1939 had named religious as one of the main opponents of the NS-system. Bishop Berning preached in favour of the religious and listed constructed untrue reasons as causes to dissolve a religious community.<sup>31</sup> This was the case in Meppen.

On 26 April 1941, the Gestapo came to the house. The next day, the house was confiscated.<sup>32</sup> They were expelled on 15 May 1941.<sup>33</sup> The reason was that anti-state pamphlets were found by one Gestapo-men underneath a press in the library – placed there by himself. The Marists had to leave and could not live within 100 km.<sup>34</sup> When Fr Anton Scheper (1898-1968), superior, asked, what if they refuse, the use of violence was threatened. The Gestapo established an inventory of the house which still exists.<sup>35</sup>

After this, the neighbouring community in Ahmsen was under pressure. What would happen? The Gestapo came on 18 May 1941 and searched the house for three hours. Then they declared it confiscated. They did not bother to give reasons. Fr Ewald Schürmann (1902-1986), superior, was informed they had to leave, hand over the cash, and the bank accounts. The Marists had 24 hours to leave. The village people stood in anger and sadness along the roads when the Marists walked away to the next train station on 19 May. A few days later, the Gestapo sold the farm animals and household goods.<sup>36</sup>

The same fate happened to many other religious communities in the Emsland.

Wolterkessen, bursar and mission procurator in Meppen, lived in exile with the Marist Brothers in Recklinghausen. He was a regional superior for the Marists in exile in the north. With the support of Berning and other major religious superiors he protested against the government and demanded their financial assets back, at least what belonged to the house, as the mission funds were under suspicion by the government. In a letter to the Marists he said that from 24 September 1942, the houses in Meppen and Ahmsen were not under Gestapo authority any longer but under the authority of the finance office in Lingen.

After 40 years in Meppen and 19 years in Ahmsen Marist presence ended. Meppen became a military hospital and later a house for displaced persons. Ahmsen was empty for a time. Then it served a social organisation of the NS-party. The village people tried to rescue the sacred vessels. The province structure was badly damaged.

On 30 July 1941, Hitler stopped the *Klostersturm*. With the war on he wanted to avoid unrest at home. However, confiscations continued.

### *Fürstenzell 1931 - 1945*

The house was situated in the diocese of Passau. Its strong man was the vicar general, Dr. Franz Seraph Riemer (1884-1965; in office 1931-1960). The Gestapo reports for the area had a very negative image of him for fighting strongly for all Church institutions and they complained

<sup>29</sup> Rapp, *Devisenprozesse*, p. 90.

<sup>30</sup> *Kreuz und Caritas* was published 12 times a year. In 1950 it was followed by *Der Maristenbote*.

<sup>31</sup> Leugers, *Mauer*, p. 156.

<sup>32</sup> Licher, *Vertreibung*.

<sup>33</sup> Zumholz, *Anpassung – Verweigerung – Widerstand*.

<sup>34</sup> *Priester unter Hitlers Terror*, col. 1298, Pater Düren.

<sup>35</sup> ‚Gesamtzusammenstellung über das Inventar des beschlagnahmten Maristenklosters Meppen, der Treuhänder Kreis-Oberinspektor‘, Archive Region of Germany.

<sup>36</sup> Archive Region of Germany, ‚Geschichte Maristenkloster Ahmsen‘, ca. 1948, and ‚Erinnerungen Bruder Franz‘; Heinrich Gertken, *Maristenkloster Ahmsen*, in *Holte*, p. 358-364.

about the resistance against the NS-State in the Catholic Church.<sup>37</sup> The diocese had to help in the administration of occupied territories in neighbouring Czechoslovakia and also for the Marists who had no recourse to their higher superiors in Rome anymore.<sup>38</sup>

The village of Fürstenzell was strongly in favour of the National Socialists.<sup>39</sup> The Marists had opened a house there in 1931 – only two years before the political change. There were about 75, mainly young people, in the community. Assistant Schaefer visited in April 1936 and in 1938.<sup>40</sup> In 1932, the Marists participated in a local ‚Day against the Godless‘. The speakers of the NS party however dominated. Government reports like the one of 7 March 1935 blamed the bursar for being drunk and speaking against the government. This was Fr Gerhard Schroer against whom a court case was initiated on 5 April but halted for lack of evidence. One month later, the Gestapo gave Fr Adolf Unterholzner (1892-1962) a strong warning because of his sermons against the new paganism promoted by the government.

Since 1937 the community had prepared to evacuate the house. Civil dress and money were set aside. The house chronicle was not continued.

Another disruption of the routine came in 1938 when the monastery had to house military units on their way to Czechoslovakia or children leaving Hamburg given a holiday by the state. On 18 March, the Gestapo searched the house for three hours and questioned the provincial for another three hours. He had to sign he would not talk about the interview.<sup>41</sup> The same year, the first coadjutor brothers, Vitus and Cyrillus, had to join the army. In 1940, the first seminarian, Fritz Heitmann, had to become a soldier and the last group of seminarians ordained was Schäfer, Schmülling, Richter und Wester. A Gestapo-report of that year says the Marists listened to enemy radio broadcasts.

In 1939, 50 Dutch and German seminarians studied theology. That summer, the Dutch consul advised the Dutch students to leave Germany.<sup>42</sup> The theological institute gradually emptied as the German students had to join the army. However, it was not officially closed like other theological institutes. Until 1944, the superior sent a yearly report to the government.<sup>43</sup> When Frs Herzberg and Willy Neufeld applied to lecture, the Gestapo had to give permission. They said that except they are religious we are not aware of information that they would be against the national socialist state.

3 October 1941, Gerhard Robben, the last remaining seminarian had to go to war. Some of the Marist professors taught in nearby Passau for the Salvatorians which could open their study house a bit longer.<sup>44</sup>

The community was afraid they also would lose the house like other congregations in the area and like the confreres in the north. After long negotiations they managed to win a contract with the army to establish the house as a military hospital in November 1941. Like others they tried to link up with the army to escape actions taken by the party. The ongoing war with more wounded offered this option. The Marists would look after the house, present a chaplain, and some brothers could stay to help. On the other hand, the army invested a lot in renovations of the building and allowed the community to keep a small space. The provincial could stay and

<sup>37</sup> Herbert Wurster, *Bistum Passau*, in Hummels/Kösters (eds.), *Zwangsarbeit*, 435-444, p. 437.

<sup>38</sup> *Die kirchliche Lage in Bayern nach den Regierungspräsidentenberichten 1933-1943, IV, Regierungsbezirk Niederbayern und Oberpfalz 1933-1945* (Kommission für Zeitgeschichte, A: Quellen, Band 16), Mainz, Matthias Grünewald, 1973, p. 252.

<sup>39</sup> Walter Berchtold, Johann-Bernhard Haversath, Alois Kapsner, *Fürstenzell in der Zeit des Nationalsozialismus*, in Id., (eds.), *Fürstenzell: Kultur, Mensch, Natur. Vom Klosterdorf zur Marktgemeinde*, Salzweg, 2017, 68-70.

<sup>40</sup> Hauschronik Fürstenzell; Alois Kapsner, *Die Geschichte des Klosters. Von den Zisterziensern zu den Maristen*, in Raiffeisenbank Fürstenzell eG (ed.), *Cella Principum, Das Fürstenzeller Heimatbuch*, 1995, 63-80, here p. 78-80; Horst Seehars, *Die Maristen in Fürstenzell*, thesis, München, 1983.

<sup>41</sup> ABP, Hochschulstudium, Niederschrift Generalvikar Riemer.

<sup>42</sup> Rosina Schacherbauer, *Die Maristen in Fürstenzell*, thesis, Universität Passau, October 1997.

<sup>43</sup> Martin Bormann initiated on 6 September 1939 to close theological faculties. Passau was affected on 9 October; see W. Becker (ed.), *Passau in der Zeit des Nationalsozialismus*, Passau, Universitätsverlag, 1999, p. 459. The annual reports for Fürstenzell are in the state archive in Landshut.

<sup>44</sup> Leonhard Berchtold sds, *Geschichtlicher Vortrag anlässlich der Abschiedsfeier der Salvatorianer vom Klosterberg am 25. März 2006*, private manuscript.

remained a point of contact for the confreres dispersed all over Europe. Fr Valentin Antczak (1904-1978) could continue the *Unifra* (from the Latin *Unio fraterna*, fraternal unity). He received letters from the Marists everywhere and used excerpts as material for a circular. Thus they were informed where confreres served, who had died and so on. In May 1942, the injured began to arrive. 20 Benedictine nuns also came to help. Early 1945, 500 injured soldiers were in the house, among those one Marist.

All those measures by the government strengthened silent resistance in the population. The Gestapo-report for 8 March 1940 in Lower Bavaria stated: figures of people leaving the Catholic Church are going down. The broader masses are still bound to their church.<sup>45</sup>

In 1942, Fr Otto Goldhagen (Niederachdorf) was in prison for two weeks because he expressed views against the government. In February 1943, Fr Antczak was forbidden to teach. In May the house of Fürstzell was searched again.

Wieschemeyer, who had to undergo surgery in 1944, tried to steer the province through those years. With no contact to Rome, he had to ask the local bishop for advice and permissions concerning religious affairs.<sup>46</sup> On 3 December 1942, he sent out a circular on how to behave as a Marist soldier (money, holidays, liturgy, and fidelity to religious spirit). The other Fathers had in part to leave the house and serve as curates in neighbouring parishes. The diocesan curates had to go to war and so elder religious priests were employed.

Following the call by Pope Pius XII the Marists like others in as much as they could meet, celebrated the consecration to the Immaculate Heart of Mary in 1943.<sup>47</sup>

#### *St. Olav, Niederachdorf, Teterow*

These were three small communities. In 1940, St. Olav was searched, and in 1941 occupied by the German army. Fr. Pleimling lived with a nearby family to watch the house. In Niederachdorf, a last novitiate was started but had to finish early – the novices were called to the army.<sup>48</sup> Teterow in the East German diaspora cared for Catholics from many countries who were stranded there during the war. The latter two houses could offer hospitality to Marists on holiday from the war fronts.

#### **The Province after the war**

With the war over the Marists were left with a lot of insecurity about the fate of many of their confreres. Were they dead or alive? Millions of people were on the move in all directions, among them former soldiers trying to get home.

It took a long and complicated legal and political process to get back the houses in Meppen, Ahmsen, and Fürstzell. Teterow was damaged by the Russian army and in Ahmsen the farm burnt down in February 1945. Houses were affected by the restructuring of rooms and the damage done by the different occupants. They also tried to get their accounts and funds back. Very slowly religious life, ministry, and elements of formation could begin. Unexpectedly a surviving confrere might knock at the door. For others, the letter came that he passed away or was missing in one of the battle fields in Europe. The school in Meppen was still occupied with displaced persons in 1946 and so the school re-started in Ahmsen instead. The move back to Meppen finally took place in October 1947.

When Meppen was still a military hospital one of the wounded soldiers had carved a huge corpus of Christ crucified. After the war, the Marists gave this corpus to his family. Later, the family returned it to the community and it is still in the main corridor of the school today, a silent witness of those difficult years.

Fürstzell saw most of the confreres back in June 1945. In August, the last injured soldiers left the house and were replaced by refugees. In October lessons began for seminarians back

<sup>45</sup> *Die kirchliche Lage*, p. 262.

<sup>46</sup> ABP, Sonstiges.

<sup>47</sup> *Unifra-Rundbrief* 1 May 1943. Text: cf. *Gotteslob*, German hymn book, here for Osnabrück Diocese, 1996, no. 807 and 808. Marists celebrating the dedication in Lathen: copy Archive of the Region.

<sup>48</sup> ABP, Noviziat, end September 1940.

from the war. Permission to reopen the institute was given: ‚They never taught the Nazi-ideology or militarism. There is no negative feeling against the United Nations‘. In October 1947, the Marists sought permission to open a secondary school. This took place one year later.<sup>49</sup> The school still exists albeit in a later modern building.

For Teterow, the situation was much worse because of the Russian occupation. Their army had damaged the house and church. The confreres had to live in outstations. Very little contact was possible with the communities in Western Germany.

St. Olav became part of the newly erected Dutch Vice-Province in 1947.

De facto, there was no *Stunde Null* (zero hour). It was a process which took a long time until Marist communities were re-established in some form of normality. Some legal and financial issues took until 1958. The Marists tried to re-connect with religious life as understood before the war. However, the men had changed. The war had left a mark on them. Coadjutor Brothers for example, who gained a high military rank as soldiers had now to revert to a serving position in the religious hierarchy with a superior of formerly much lower military rank.

Schools run by religious faced many difficulties in occupied post-war Germany. Fr Adalbert Herzberg (1903-1975), Fürstzell, initiated a meeting of principals which finally established the union of principals still in existence today.<sup>50</sup>

In April 1947 the provincial chapter met to discuss re-established religious life and to elect delegates for the general chapter at the end of that year. In 1951, a circular of the provincial warned against the ‚*Zeitgeist* of today, materialism, egoism, pleasure seeking‘. In 1951, the first two missionaries could leave for the Pacific and gradually Marists from there could come home for a holiday.

1950 was declared a Holy Year in the Church. In some ways normality was then reached as before the war. However, huge shifts in mentality had taken place and the German Marists will forever face the question: what was your position in Nazi-Germany?

### **Relationships among the Marist units during and after the war**

This would deserve a broad study of the different Marist units. I would like to highlight some moments of reconciliation and ongoing good relationships in spite of the war situation. What they shared as Marists could often overcome what separated them as members of different states at war with each other. For the German and Dutch Marists this is rooted in years of common formation in St. Olav and later Fürstzell. German and Dutch Marist letters during those years echo the lasting friendly contact. The German Province had to reconnect to the wider Society of Mary. A great sign of confidence was the election of Franz Wieschemeyer as one of the general assistants at the general chapter in 1947.

Angelo Roncalli, nuncio in Paris, said: ‚Abbé Stock – this name is a program‘. French Marists helped to rediscover and honour this German diocesan priest.<sup>51</sup> In the Pacific, Australian Marists started the mission in Japan as a sign of reconciliation.<sup>52</sup> Many years after the war French Marist Marcel Mahé came to see the place of forced labour near the present community in Dessau. New Zealand Marist Jack Ward came to speak to the people in Bremen where their bomber squad had dropped their bombs though it was a housing estate. Both events received a good mention in the local civil and church press.

### **Resistance, religious niche, victims?**

<sup>49</sup> ABP, Maristengymnasium 1948.

<sup>50</sup> Sr. Annuntiata Bays, *Geschichte der ODIV*, in Vereinigung katholischer Schulen in Ordenstradition Ordensdirektorenvereinigung (ODIV), *Weite und Tiefe*. Referate und Beiträge zur 50. Jahrestagung der ODIV und zum Symposium des AKS: 40 Jahre Konzilsdeklaration „Gravissimum educationis“ vom 7. bis 9. November 2005, Würzburg, 2006, p. 73-92. Here: [www.odiv.de](http://www.odiv.de), Literatur [accessed 21 March 2013].

<sup>51</sup> René Closset sm, *L'aumônier de l'enfer: Franz Stock, aumônier de Fresnes, du Cherche-Midi et de la Santé en 1940*, Mulhouse, Editions Salvator, 1964, reprint 1998; Id., *Er ging durch die Hölle. Franz Stock*. Einleitung von Walter Dirks, Paderborn, Bonifatius, <sup>5</sup>1984 (1979).

<sup>52</sup> Paul Glynn sm, *„Like a Samurai“*. *The Tony Glynn Story*, Marist Fathers, Australia, 2008.

How does one evaluate the events from 1933 to 1950? Did the Marists join attempts of resistance? They did not on a big scale and not by using violence. They made small attempts within their ministry as priests and met with resistance and some of them with days in prison. Like other religious and the church in general they hoped to survive this, withdrawing to their religious niche. However, the state more and more narrowed down their outreach, began to close houses and ministries, and gradually broke up the structure of the province so that it hardly could function. Measures would have become much more radical had the NS-system won the war. In many ways the Marists were caught between the loyalty to their legal government like citizens in any other state and their status as religious. In many ways they were victims. One fifth of the membership died, as did many future novices. For eight years there was no formation. Houses, assets, funds, and other inventory were lost or damaged. At great cost the province had to rebuild community spaces. The Teterow community became isolated in the Eastern Zone. International reputation was badly damaged. This part of history will never be forgotten.

The first novitiate opened in 1947 with eight novices. In Meppen and Fürstzell schools opened. By 1954 the fate of all confreres was finally known. Some left after the war because of the terrible things they had experienced. They could not reconcile all this with what faith told them. The major superiors of North-West Germany respected this in a circular letter of 7 August 1946. They asked the Vatican for understanding and compassion for those who sought dispensation after all what they had gone through in the war. Religious were explicitly forbidden by an order of Hitler to act as chaplains. They all had to serve as soldiers, or at least as medical assistants.

## Conclusion

„For those who sought the child’s life are dead“ - with this quote from Matthew 2:20 the chronicler opened the entries after the war for the years of the war. In 1947, Alcime Cyr, newly elected superior general, wrote about the ‚distressing events of these last years‘, with the loss of lives. The chapter of that year decided to start a magazine to promote unity among Marists worldwide after the disruptions of the war in Europe and in the Pacific – the origin of the *Acta Societatis Mariae – in vinculo caritatis*. Cyr and Sirois, bursar general, came on visitation to Germany in April 1949.<sup>53</sup>

In 1973, celebrating 50 years of the Province of Germany, the then provincial, Hermann Schäfer (1910-2001), himself a soldier in the war wrote:

„Then began the bloody rule of the National Socialists. The previous years were marked by the economic crisis, unemployment and radicalism from left and right wing groups. A cynical fight began against everything church. Vocations were ridiculed, church work forbidden. In 1939 the world war came. Marists had to respond to their duty as citizens. The Marian month May 1941 saw the expulsion from Meppen and Ahmsen. No missionaries could leave for the Pacific. After the war it took us many years to return to normality.“

Until the 1960s the Catholic Church had the image as a place of resistance during the Hitler-time. Rolf Hochhuth’s play *The Representative* of 1963 changed this image to the opposite. The TV series *Holocaust* of 1979 brought the fate of the Jews back to memory. The post-war years in Germany are marked by a series of efforts to face this past. Some will say not radical enough. The victims of the Catholic Church were remembered in many ways, for example in the *Martyrologium* of the 20th Century, a project initiated by Pope John Paul II. The German edition covers two big tomes, published in a fourth edition. Fr Wilhelm Weber who was killed on Bougainville on 8 May 1945 is among those mentioned.<sup>54</sup>

Did the German Marists pass the test of the ‚school of the cross‘?  
Who would?‘

<sup>53</sup> See *Acta SM* N. 1 (15.8.1949), preface, and p. 23 (visitation).

<sup>54</sup> *Zeugen für Christus*, p. 1159-1161.

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