

From *The Tablet* (London)—May 16, 2015, p. 32

## Conscience that Would Not Be Silenced

by Christa Pongratz-Lippitt

*The Tablet* has reported on many despots and regimes but few have matched the Nazis for their ruthlessness in dealing with their opponents. For one reader of this publication, it was the journal itself that was seen as evidence of his stand against Hitler—a stand that led to his death

Looking back over my 26 years as *The Tablet's* Vienna correspondent, I can think of no more remarkable story than that of Blessed Jakob Gapp. This Austrian priest and martyr drew direct inspiration from *The Tablet* as he opposed Hitler and the Nazis, for which he was executed in 1943. Indeed, he was questioned about the journal by his Nazi interrogators in the days leading up to his death.

Jakob Gapp was born in the small market town of Wattens, in Tyrol, in 1897. His father was a factory worker at the local paper works, and Jakob was the youngest of his seven sons. After attending the local primary school, Gapp secured a place at the Franciscan high school at Hall near Innsbruck.

He served in Italy in the First World War where he was taken prisoner. Then a year after his return to Austria in 1919, Gapp joined the Society of Mary and was sent to the Marianist seminary at Fribourg in Switzerland where he was ordained in 1930.

Four years later he was posted to the “Marien-Institut” in Graz, a highly thought-of Marianist school for boys that attracted pupils from within as well as outside of Austria. He was responsible for religious instruction at the school.

Gapp realised that Graz was rapidly becoming a Nazi stronghold. He had read the article condemning National Socialism in *L'Osservatore Romano* of October 11, 1930, which warned that “membership of Hitler’s National Socialist Party is incompatible with the Catholic conscience,” Gapp also had carefully studied Nazi ideology. He was appalled and shocked by Hitler’s chief ideologist, Alfred Rosenberg, whose *Myth of the Twentieth Century* was the Nazi Party’s most important ideological work after Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*.

“It was while I was reading Rosenberg’s *Myth of the Twentieth Century*,” he told his interrogators at his trial, “that I realised that National Socialism was in fact totally incompatible with the Catholic faith.... I saw it as my duty to enlighten my fellow Catholics and my pupils.”

Gapp openly voiced his views on the dangers of National Socialism for Christianity and

the Church; moreover, he stubbornly refused to say “Heil Hitler,” a fact that was increasingly noticed when he passed people in the streets of Graz. The Marianists at the school hoped against hope that if they obediently said “Heil Hitler,” wore swastika badges in their buttonholes and hung photographs of Hitler in their classrooms, the Nazis would not close the school. Gapp’s refusal to cooperate was soon seen as a danger both for the school and for his fellow Marianists, and it was decided he had to go.

He left Graz for Upper Austria in March 1938 and spent the rest of 1938 moving—or being moved—from parish to parish in Austria. As he went on openly criticising National Socialism in his sermons and called Rosenberg’s book a “pack of lies,” the Gestapo never left his trail. He was now a hunted man. His first application for a passport so that he could leave Austria was refused; with the help of the Marianist provincial, he was finally able to acquire one. On January 21, 1939, Gapp left Austria for the Marianist motherhouse at Bordeaux in France.

After four months at Bordeaux, he was sent on to Spain. On his arrival, to his great dismay, his Spanish fellow Marianists greeted him with “Heil Hitler.” They saw Germany as a friendly country and unquestioningly accepted the Spanish media’s pro-German coverage of the war which naturally never mentioned church persecution in the Third Reich or Nazi diatribes against the Holy See. Gapp was close to despair and decided to apply to the British consulate at Valencia for a visa to Great Britain.

“It was in Valencia that I contacted the English consulate,” Gapp told his interrogators in Berlin in 1943. “My reasons for doing so were the following: things were not going well for me at school ... I didn’t fit in, as in my opinion, my fellow Marianists were first of all Spaniards and then Catholics. They were all unconditional friends of Germany.” Gapp asked the British vice consul, Everett Sheldon, what his hopes were of getting a visa to England. Sheldon said it wouldn’t be easy as Austrians were enemy aliens, but he took the priest’s passport and said he would do his best.

In the summer of 1942, Gapp made several visits to the consulate and was given English journals, including *The Tablet*, to read and take away with him. At his interrogation in Berlin, he was needled about these visits. Why had he gone to the British consulate knowing that Germany was at war with England? Had he passed the “propaganda material” he received on each occasion on to others? What did *The Tablet* have to say about the war? Had he discussed the contents with other people?

“I distributed the news about the religious situation in Germany among my (Spanish) colleagues because I am convinced that religious concerns are more important than national ones and that Nazi Germany is the Catholic Church’s mortal enemy,” he explained to his interrogators.

After several weeks, Sheldon informed Gapp that his application for a British visa had been refused and returned his passport.

That autumn, two men who said that they were Jews from Berlin and had fled to Spain in

1935 approached Gapp and asked him to give them instruction in the Catholic faith as they wanted to convert. Gapp, who was by now fluent in Spanish, was unexpectedly offered a post as parish priest in another part of Spain, and his two new “pupils” offered to take him on a picnic as a “goodbye present” before he left. He never returned from the picnic. The two men were Gestapo agents. They drove him to the Spanish-French border at Hendaye where the Gestapo got into the car and whisked him to Berlin.

He was taken straight to Himmler’s notorious Reich Security Main Office (RSHA) in Berlin, whose officers’ duty was to fight “all enemies of the Reich” at home and abroad. For two days in January 1943 he was interrogated nonstop in the department responsible for matters concerning religion by a Dr Karl-Ludwig Neuhaus. At 1 P.M. on August 13, 1943, he was informed that he would be guillotined at 7 P.M. that day.

“At 7:08 the convicted prisoner was brought in by two warders with his hands tied behind his back,” the meticulously detailed Plötzensee prison reports state. “He was calm and collected and let himself be laid on the guillotine apparatus without resistance—whereupon the executioner carried out the execution, which took nine seconds.”

The fact that he considered his faith more important than the Fatherland was deemed so “heinous” a crime that the prison authorities were forbidden to hand his body over to his relatives, as it was feared that he might become a martyr in the eyes of the Catholic faithful.

Information about Father Gapp which proved vital in the path to his beatification was found in the “Jakob Gapp” file from the National Socialist People’s court in Berlin. That was nearly destroyed after being shipped by the Nazi leadership to a paper mill near Munich to be pulped. It was later rescued from destruction in May 1945 when it was discovered by the US Counter Intelligence Corps and taken to Berlin to be housed in the Berlin Document Centre. Gapp’s file was made accessible to the public in 1986.

But as well as these documents, Gapp’s chief interrogator, Karl-Ludwig Neuhaus, who lived to see him beatified, was an important witness in the beatification process.

“Father Gapp impressed me deeply. I know of no other person who made me think more about the meaning of life, its beginning and its end. People like him are rare, and the number of those who really put into practice that one must obey God more than human beings is very, very small. He was a ray of hope,” Neuhaus said.

I first heard Father Gapp’s story at a press conference in Vienna in July 1993. It was called by the vice postulator of his cause, the late Father Josef Levit, SM, who went on to become a good friend. At the beginning of the press conference, Father Levit called out, “Is anyone from *The Tablet* here, by any chance?” Somewhat surprised, as *The Tablet* wasn’t as yet well known in Vienna, I raised my hand and was asked to come into the back room after the conference. There Father Levit told me he had been to Berlin and had been able to get copies of Gapp’s interrogation. The Marianists would be very grateful if I could copy some of the *Tablets* Gapp would have been given in Valencia in 1942 to see

what exactly he would have read and distributed on the eve of Stalingrad.

On my next visit to London, I spent some time in the room where archive copies were then housed, downstairs from the editorial offices, reading and copying those slim wartime *Tablets* from Paternoster Row. Father Gapp no doubt found what he was looking for: namely, reports of church persecution, news of the internment camps, pastoral letters critical of Nazi ideology, and objective news from the war fronts. (Incidentally, *The Tablet* cost sixpence on the eve of Stalingrad in 1942. The Epistle for Sunday was translated and commented on by Mgr Ronald Knox, and there were also always homey domestic advertisements titled “Fats for Fitness!” or “Cheese for Choice” and advice on how to gain warmth and energy by eating extra sugars and starches.)

I was asked by the Marianists to represent *The Tablet* at Father Gapp’s beatification in Rome on November 24, 1996. Pope John Paul II was far from well that day. When Bishop Reinhold Stecher of Innsbruck loudly announced, “*The Tablet*,” the pope smiled and looked me deeply in the eyes. There I met several of the Society of Mary’s provincials from all over the world. I was surprised to find how many of them were regular *Tablet* readers and how well *The Tablet* was known in the furthest corners of the world. They told me that *The Tablet*’s chief attraction in the Far East and many other parts of the world was its Catholicism in the true sense, which takes us back to what Father Gapp told his interrogators: “*The Tablet* is an English church paper, Catholic in the best sense of the word and serious. I even intended to subscribe.”