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Maria Springer

We lived under great pressure

Maria Springer was born on 27th June 1923 in Innsbruck. Her mother Katherina Entacher and her sister Hilde were persecuted by the National Socialists due to their membership of the Jehovah's Witnesses and were arrested several times.

As a result, at the age of seventeen, Maria Springer was already responsible for her father and her young nephew. Furthermore, she also felt obliged to hide and provide for her sister Hilde's husband, Alois Lanthaler, a leading Jehovah's Witness who often sought refuge with the Entacher family. For these reasons, Maria Springer had to give up her job and was under great pressure. It is also due to her courage that she was able to care for her sister's baby when it was born in prison.



The 'Deutsche Wehrmacht' on their way to the Austrian border at the Brenner, driving along Maria-Theresien-Straße in Innsbruck, 12 March 1938. (c) ÖNB/Lothar Rübelt

When, in 1940, my mother Katarina Entacher and my sister Hilde were sent to prison due to their beliefs as Jehovah's Witnesses, my sister Elsa and I did our best to care for our father Georg and our nephew Walther. In spring 1944, due to the renewed imprisonment of my mother and sister, it became necessary to give up my job as a kindergarten teacher trainee in order to care and provide for my father and my nine year old nephew. On top of this came my moral duty to provide for Alois Lanthaler, who was persecuted and hunted for his beliefs and lived underground. That became a great strain and challenge for me and my nephew. For neither my father [who was not a Jehovah's Witness] nor any of my relatives friends or neighbors could be allowed to suspect a thing. We lived under great pressure and tension. We were never safe from police checks or house searches. This was made all the more difficult by the fact that we only had two ration cards with which we had to provide for three people. That required further sacrifice from us, not to mention my financial difficulties. My savings were all gone.

Sometime in May 1944, I felt brave enough to take action in order to request some relief for my mother and sister. So I traveled to Munich, located the Gestapo department in the police headquarters, and found the responsible Commissar Grimm. The conversation seemed positive. Mr. Grimm gave me cause to hope that I would be able to take home my sister's baby after the birth and he also promised me permission to write and even that I could visit my mother in the Pfettrach camp [today part of Altdorf, Lower Bavaria] near Landshut. And so it came to be that in June 1944, under difficult circumstances, I was able to collect baby Luise from the Aichach prison [Bavaria]. From that time on, both of Hilde's children were in my care.

Mrs. Springer also campaigned tirelessly for her sister's release, as is demonstrated by the following letter from her to Commissar Grimm:

Dear Commissar Grimm,

With reference to a letter from my sister Hilde, I am writing to you today with a special request. During my visit to Aichach for the purpose of collecting Hilde's child, I could not fail to notice how fragile and sick my sister was as she lay there (after two operations on her chest). I cannot see the sense in robbing an innocent creature as mentally and physically weak as my sister of her freedom. And I do not question for a minute that she is innocent. Of course, one has to ask oneself, what good does it do anybody if Hilde is just laying there sick and can therefore not be questioned and is, in fact, merely a burden on those around her. I implore you to understand my meaning.

Please consider these lines, in which I beseech you to please, please exercise some compassion.

Would it not be possible for Hilde to return home until she is back to full health? You could summon her back at any time. Hilde's third operation is approaching and I am doubtful as to whether she will be able survive it.

I have her son with me and her baby daughter. I cannot understand how they can simply be taken from their mother.

I know that during the course of your work you have seen a lot and I can understand that you remain detached. But please try and see the matter from a different perspective – I can't believe that you find my actions to be absurd.

At the time, you granted me the permission to write to my sister as often as Hilde and I wished. But sadly, it seems that it was not to be. For example, Hilde did not receive any of our parcels and a few letters also failed to reach her. We receive post from her twice a month. I cannot find an explanation for it.

I would also like to express a further request. The clothing ration card of my father is among Hilde's possessions – I have to listen to his daily reproaches and complaints; he needs it urgently. Should it be in your custody, please be so kind as to return it to me. Otherwise, could you please organize for it to be sent to my father?

Despite her intercession, Mrs. Springer was unable to help her sister. Hilde Entacher was charged with undermining military strength and was to be brought to Berlin and beheaded. Due to the war ending she was spared this fate and released. Maria Springer's mother Katharina and Alois Lanthaler also survived. Shortly after Hilde's release, her baby died suddenly, just short of its second birthday.

Maria Springer was herself recognized by the National Fund as "righteous" for her acts of courage.

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