Mildred Fish-Harnack
Germany's Secret Hero

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Glossary

emigrate (v): ............ to move from one country to live in another

equal rights (n): ........... the same treatment for all people

guillotine (n): ............. a machine used to behead people as punishment

Nazi (n): ................. a nickname for the National Socialist German Workers Party; political party led by Adolf Hitler whose goal was to make Germany the most powerful country in the world

progressive (adj): ........ in favor of improvement, progress, and new ideas

resistance group (n): .... an organization formed to fight back against authority

sauerkraut (n): ............ shredded cabbage that is salted and fermented to make it sour; means sour cabbage in German

university (n): ............. a school for higher education; usually after high school

World War I (WWI) (n): ... a war fought from 1914 to 1918 mainly in Europe; France, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, the United States, and other allied countries defeated Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and Turkey

World War II (WWII) (n): a war fought from 1939 to 1945 in Europe and eastern Asia; France, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, the United States, and other allied countries defeated Germany, Italy, and Japan
Hitler and the Nazi Party began to lose many battles, sometimes due in part to the information shared by the Red Orchestra. The tide of war had turned against Germany.

World War II ended in Europe when Germany surrendered in 1945, but the world was not at peace. Little recognition was given to Mildred after her death even though her actions and Arvid’s helped defeat Germany.

Mildred Fish-Harnack is remembered as a fearless woman who defied a government and laws that were harmful to others. Rather than fleeing to the safety of the US, Mildred had the courage to fight and help save the country she loved. In fact, her last spoken words were in German: “And I have loved Germany so much.” Mildred believed in doing what she thought right. She showed how the actions of one person can help save people’s lives.

In 1986, Wisconsin declared September 16 Mildred Fish-Harnack Day to honor her selfless actions.

How do you hope to be remembered? (1938)

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Most laws are created to ensure safety and order in society. But would you follow the laws if they were hurting people?

Mildred Fish-Harnack chose to stand up to laws she did not agree with. She challenged one of the greatest evils in history—Adolf Hitler and his Nazi regime. Hitler led Germany from 1933 to 1945. His laws caused World War II and the murder of millions of people.

Mildred could not stand by and do nothing. This brave and resilient woman decided to work against Hitler to help save people’s lives and the Germany she loved.

On February 16, 1943, a chaplain visited a frail and sickly Mildred. Her once thick, blonde hair was thin and gray. The chaplain gave her a picture of her mother. She kissed the picture and wrote on the back, “The face of my mother expresses everything I want to say at this moment. This face was with me through these last months.” Mildred’s mother was a source of strength for her even at the end of her life.

At 6:57 p.m., Mildred Fish-Harnack was executed.

The Red Orchestra was a resistance group that worked against Hitler and the Nazis. The organization gave Nazi secrets to countries such as the Soviet Union and the US so that they could work to defeat Hitler. The Red Orchestra also helped people flee from the Nazis. The members were so secretive that they often did not know each other. They did this because they feared they could be jailed or executed if discovered.
CAPTURED!

Mildred and Arvid were vacationing in Preila (present-day Lithuania) on September 7, 1942. Arvid went outside alone but returned with three well-dressed men. After entering the house, Arvid told Mildred to pack their things so they could return to Berlin. Mildred knew these men weren’t there to visit; they were German secret police officers intending to take them to prison.

Back in Berlin, Mildred and Arvid were imprisoned in narrow, solitary cells and tortured. Mildred and Arvid went on trial in secret. Arvid believed he would probably be executed, so he spoke freely at his trial about his hatred of the Nazi Party. He also took the blame for Mildred’s actions against the Nazis, hoping to save his wife’s life.

Mildred and Arvid were found guilty on December 19, 1942. Mildred’s sentence was six years of hard labor, and Arvid was sentenced to death. He was hanged three days later. Arvid died believing his wife would not suffer the same fate.

Hitler learned of Mildred’s sentence and demanded a retrial. Mildred was retried, found guilty, and sentenced to death. Hitler himself signed her execution order.

EARLY LIFE

Milwaukee, Wisconsin, was a bustling hub of German immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century. The city was home to Mildred Fish, who was born on September 16, 1902, to Georgina and William Fish.

Mildred loved to be the center of attention. Headstrong Mildred showed her dramatic side while pretending, passionately reciting stories and poems, or striking a pose to stand out in a crowd.

Mildred and her older siblings, Harriette and twins Marion and Marbeau, enjoyed spending time outdoors doing things like swimming in the Milwaukee River and ice skating in their yard. The crew also liked going for elephant rides at the Milwaukee Zoo. Those only cost a nickel.
The Fish family lived a very modest lifestyle. They moved often because they could not afford their rent. William grew bored easily, and so he often changed jobs. This did not help the family’s financial situation.

In 1914, Mildred was 12 years old when World War I erupted in Europe. Germany and its allies battled other European countries. The United States (US) government disputed Germany’s actions. Mildred was not German, but she followed the war closely because she loved studying German culture.

In 1939, World War II began in Europe. Germany and Italy fought against France, Poland, and Great Britain. Other countries soon joined the war. Mildred continued to work within the Red Orchestra, discreetly handing off notes in parks and whispering Nazi secrets to spies in restrooms. She also helped Jews escape Germany to safety in other countries.

Arvid bought Mildred a one-way steamer ticket to the US because he felt Germany was too dangerous. But Mildred refused to go. She wanted to stay with Arvid and continue her work in Germany.

Liberty Cabbage

During World War I, people in Milwaukee removed German poetry from school lessons and stopped printing the city’s German newspaper. They even renamed sauerkraut “liberty cabbage.”

Sauerkraut, sausage, and potatoes are a traditional German meal.

Despite the war, Mildred completed her PhD on November 20, 1941. This is her degree from the University of Giessen.

Courtesy of the German Resistance Memorial Center.
In 1933, Hitler became the leader of Germany. The Harnacks detested his political goals and the laws he created so they decided to work against him. Arvid’s government job gave him access to the Nazis’ financial records and other important documents. He secretly shared the information with enemy countries in hopes it would help them defeat the Nazis. In order to work, Mildred had to join the Nazi Party. She used her teaching position to influence students against Hitler.

Mildred and Arvid formed a resistance group the German secret police called the Red Orchestra. Members loathed the Nazis’ actions and hoped to remove the party from power to return peace to Germany.

Mildred and the Red Orchestra transcribed and shared radio reports from other countries about battles Hitler lost, information the Nazis tried to conceal. Members of the group also handed out anti-Nazi pamphlets.

In 1937, Mildred and Arvid visited her family in Wisconsin. The family noticed Mildred had changed from a spunky girl to a quiet and reserved woman. The Fishes thought Mildred was secretly a Nazi because of her distant attitude. They urged her and Arvid to emigrate from Germany. The couple denied the request and remarked that they had a job to do.

As a student at West Division High School, Mildred wrote for the school newspaper and was a member of Athena, a group devoted to promoting women’s rights. Mildred’s parents separated when she was in high school. Georgina Fish taught herself how to type and got a job as a secretary in Washington, DC. Mildred moved there with her mother during her last year of high school.

Although enrolled at George Washington University in Washington, DC, Mildred longed for Wisconsin. She thought Washington University was not business-like enough and transferred to the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW-Madison) in 1921. Mildred studied to become a journalist and wrote for the Wisconsin State Journal as a drama and movie critic. However, she encountered the glass ceiling as a journalist, which deterred her from pursuing the career. She switched her college courses and began studying literature.

Mildred graduated from UW-Madison in 1925 and stayed on to study literature in graduate school. She also taught college classes. One day, a lost student named Arvid Harnack wandered into her classroom. The blond, blue-eyed German scholar became enamored with Mildred and introduced himself after class.
As a progressive woman, Mildred kept her name after she got married and went by Mildred Fish-Harnack.

The pair quickly bonded over cups of coffee and discussions of nature and politics. They joined a progressive student group, and the two often hiked and canoed around Lake Mendota. On August 7, 1926, Mildred and Arvid married on her brother’s farm near Brooklyn, Wisconsin.

Arvid finished his studies in economics at UW-Madison in 1928 and moved back to Germany. Mildred remained in the US and taught English at Goucher College in Baltimore, Maryland.

Life in Germany

The couple reunited when Mildred moved to Germany in 1929. They settled in Berlin, and Mildred began working toward another college degree—a doctorate in American Literature at the University of Giessen. She taught classes and regularly translated books, poetry, and essays written in English to German, sharing her passion for literature with others.

By this time Hitler and the Nazi Party were gaining power in Germany. The political group wanted others to join the Nazi Party and share their beliefs. They persecuted ethnic groups such as Jews and Gypsies. Mildred refused to become a Nazi, causing her to lose her job at the university in May 1932.

Later that same year, Mildred traveled with Arvid and other Berlin academic leaders to the Soviet Union to learn more about the country.

Soviet Union

Mildred admired the Soviet Union because women had the right to choose where to work. Her experiences in the country fueled her desire to gain equal rights in Germany and the rest of the world.

In 1991, the Soviet Union broke apart into 15 new countries, the largest being Russia.