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Introduction

Most laws are created to help keep people safe. Would you still follow laws if they hurt people?

Adolf Hitler was the leader of Germany from 1933 to 1945. His laws led to World War II and the murder of millions of people. Mildred Fish-Harnack experienced the hardships Hitler and his followers caused. She decided to stand up to Hitler, and her actions helped save people’s lives.

Courtesy of the University of Wisconsin
Digital Collections Center. UW.MFH0021.bib.

Mildred Fish-Harnack
(1923)
EARLY LIFE

Mildred Fish was born on September 16, 1902, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to Georgina and William Fish. Mildred was not German but Milwaukee was home to many German immigrants.

Mildred loved to be the center of attention. Fearless, she acted, recited stories and poems, and struck poses. Mildred wanted to stand out in a crowd.

There were three girls and one boy in Mildred’s family. Harriette was the oldest. Next came twins Marion and Marbeau. Mildred was youngest. The siblings enjoyed spending time outdoors swimming and ice skating.

Mildred (top row, second from the left) showing her silly side in a photo with family and friends (August 1917).

Courtesy of the University of Wisconsin Digital Collections Center. UW.MFH004.bib.
The Fish family moved often because they could not afford their rent. Mildred was 12 years old when **World War I** began in Europe. Germany battled other European countries. The United States (US) disputed Germany’s actions.

**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.
Getting An Education

During high school, Mildred wrote for the school newspaper and joined a club that worked to improve women’s rights. Her parents separated when she was in high school. Mildred’s mother 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.

Mildred enrolled in George Washington University in Washington, DC, after high school, but she wanted to return to Wisconsin. So she switched to the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW-Madison) in 1921. Mildred studied literature and worked as a journalist. She wrote movie reviews for the Wisconsin State Journal.

Mildred pursued a Master’s degree in literature from the UW-Madison and taught there after graduating in 1925. One day a lost student named Arvid Harnack wandered into her classroom. The blond, blue-eyed German introduced himself after class and soon fell in love with Mildred.

Mildred (right) used her mother’s work ethic and self-reliance as a model for her own life (1917).
The couple liked to talk about nature and politics, and joined a **progressive** political student group. They 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 stayed in the US and taught English at a Maryland college.

As a progressive woman, Mildred kept her name after she got married and went by Mildred Fish-Harnack.
**LIFE IN GERMANY**

Mildred moved to Germany in 1929 to join Arvid. She attended the University of Giessen to pursue a third degree in literature. She regularly translated books, poetry, and essays from English to German.

Meanwhile, Hitler and the **Nazi** Party gained power in Germany. The group wanted others to join the Nazi Party and share their beliefs. Mildred refused, which resulted in her losing her job in 1932.

That year, Mildred traveled with Arvid and other scholars from Berlin to the Soviet Union to learn more about the country.

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**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.
Resistance

Hitler became the leader of Germany in 1933. The Harnacks despised the laws he created so they decided to work against him. Arvid’s government job gave him access to important Nazi documents. He shared the information with other countries to help them defeat Hitler.

Mildred and Arvid formed a resistance group the German secret police called the Red Orchestra. Members hoped to rid the country of Nazis and return peace to Germany. Mildred had to join the Nazi Party in order to get a job. She used her teaching position to influence students against Hitler.

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, Arvid and Mildred visited the Fish family in Wisconsin. Her family noticed Mildred had changed into a quiet and reserved woman. The Fishes thought this meant Mildred was secretly a Nazi. They asked her and Arvid to **emigrate** from Germany. The couple said no. They were determined to continue their work in Germany.

By 1939, World War II began in Europe. Mildred worked within the Red Orchestra, handing off secret notes and whispering Nazi information to other spies. She also helped Jews escape Germany to safety in other countries. Arvid bought Mildred a one-way boat 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.

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.**
Mildred and Arvid were vacationing in northern Europe on September 7, 1942. Arvid went outside alone but returned with three well-dressed men. The men were secret police who took the Harnacks to prison in Berlin where they were tortured.

Both Mildred and Arvid went on trial. Arvid believed he would be executed, so he spoke freely about his hatred of the Nazi Party at his trial. He also took the blame for Mildred working against the Nazis, hoping to save his wife’s life.

Mildred and Arvid were found guilty on December 19, 1942. Mildred received six years in prison. Arvid received a death sentence. He was hanged three days later believing Mildred would live.

Hitler learned of Mildred’s sentence and demanded a new trial. Mildred was tried again, found guilty, and sentenced to death. Hitler himself signed her death order.

Courtesy of the German Resistance Memorial Center.

Mildred and Arvid were kept in this Berlin prison before their five-day trial.
On February 16, 1943, a pastor visited Mildred, who was very sick. Her thick, blonde hair had turned thin and gray. The pastor gave her a picture of her mother. She kissed it and wrote on the back, “The face of my mother expresses everything that I want to say at this moment. This face was with me through these last months.” Her mother remained a source of strength for Mildred.

At 6:57 p.m., Mildred Fish-Harnack was put to death.
CONCLUSION

Hitler and the Nazi Party began to lose many battles, sometimes because of information the Red Orchestra passed. The tide of war turned against Germany. World War II ended in 1945.

Mildred Fish-Harnack is remembered as a fearless woman who defied laws that harmed people. Rather than fleeing to the safety of the US, Mildred had the courage to fight and save the country that 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)

Courtesy of the University of Wisconsin Digital Collections Center.
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