

“Quidquid agis, prudenter agas et respice finem”

A discussion and analysis of the “White Rose”

**A talk given before the Philosophical Club of Cleveland
by Sigrid Miller**

How many of you are thoroughly familiar with the “White Rose”? Well, you have two choices: You may go to sleep now or you may listen to what you already know so well.

After thinking about a topic for today’s presentation, I finally decided to talk about the “White Rose”. The reason for it was, that I wanted to present something to you about the country where I was raised and – in a way – it is also a continuation of Ed’s talk on the doomed Weimar Republic and the resulting rise of the Third Reich. The underlying philosophic reason for choosing this topic is the concept of human freedom; freedom of thought and expression, freedom to travel, political and economic freedom in all its preciousness and vulnerability along with the dilemma of whether one should knowingly risk and give one’s own life in the defense of that freedom.

Throughout this talk, the concept of freedom will be used in the sense of political freedom, where the right to choose and express one’s opinion is guaranteed. In other words, political freedom is seen as the foundation, or the guarantee of intellectual freedom. However, how a person uses this freedom, that is a different issue. Some may even prefer not to think at all – again, it is their right to do so. I do not intend to pursue the question of whether a free will is even possible, I am only talking about – and please let me repeat this – freedom in the sense of a legal right.

Briefly stated, the “White Rose” was a resistance group based in Munich and which operated in Germany for about a year, from early 1942 until February 1943. The name “White Rose” was arbitrarily chosen by the group’s founder, Hans Scholl, after he had read a Spanish novel with this title. Hans Scholl and other members of the group were all medical students at the University in Munich. The only female member of the group was Hans Scholl’s sister, Sophie, who was a student of biology and philosophy, also at the University in Munich. One faculty member, Kurt Huber, a professor of psychology and philosophy, was a close friend and adviser to the students and in this capacity was considered one of the associates of the “White Rose”. All members of the group were in their early to mid-twenties when they were executed by decapitation in February 1943. With what were they charged? High treason! Today, fifty-six years later, when it is not uncommon in Germany to throw eggs and tomatoes at political leaders – even the Queen of England was decorated with a tomato while visiting Germany – the kind of expression which resulted in the high treason charge is just called “expressing one’s opinion”. Times certainly have changed. I wonder, however, whether they can reverse again?

Since Hans and Sophie Scholl were not born as resistance leaders, it was very interesting for me to learn what actually triggered the transformation of a couple of

carefree, unburdened teenagers into resistance fighters. They had been actively involved in Hitler's youth groups, and were even youth group leaders. How did they become able to see and understand the atrocities of the Hitler regime while so many adults with experience and exposure seriously claimed and displayed selective amnesia in reference to the Hitler years?

Let me back up a little bit: Hans was fifteen and Sophie twelve when Hitler was brought to power – and it has to be said that he was brought to power through legal and democratic channels in 1933. It may be interesting to know that already in 1920 at a meeting in Landshut with General Ludendorf and the socialist Strasser brothers, Hitler was asked what kind of program the NSDAP (National Socialist German Worker's Party) advocated. Hitler replied, "The program is not the question. We need power." As you can see, in this respect Hitler remained true to himself. Very early on, under Hitler's leadership, the Hitler Youth organizations were established. Radio and newspapers portrayed better times, talked about the fatherland and talk of unity and love of country was heard constantly. Hitler projected that he would help this fatherland achieve greatness, fortune, and prosperity again. He would not rest he said, until "every Germany was independent, free, and happy in this fatherland". One can easily see how these early promises were able to tilt public opinion in Hitler's favor: Germany was a country with a historically weak ego, looking for and being ready to accept an idealist leader. The cleverly designed Hitler Youth Organization offered great appeal to teenagers: Together they hiked through the countryside, sang folk songs, attended evening gatherings, helped each other and casually they were told to dedicate their lives to a great cause. In other words, they were taken seriously and that, in turn, aroused their enthusiasm and loyalty to the Hitler Youth. They experienced a sense of belonging that carried them through the difficulties and loneliness of adolescence or, at least, created that illusion. Hans and Sophie joined the Hitler Youth Organization with "body and soul" and could not understand their father's displeasure. He had cautioned them, "Don't believe them – they are wolves and deceivers, and they are misusing the German people shamefully". Yes, the words were so true, but how could a young person understand the criticism when everything felt and seemed to be so right?

Within the Hitler Youth, Hans advanced quickly to group leader and was chosen to be a flagbearer at a party rally in Nuremberg. Those, of course, were two great honors that were bestowed on Hans, but something unexpected happened that would change the course of his life, FOREVER!

For some time Hans had been burdened by the prohibition against singing folksongs of different countries with his troop. The songs that told about people and their far-away lands, the beauty of the melodies...how could that be forbidden? Then – while reading a book by Stefan Zweig – the book was snatched away from him by one of the leaders and he was told that Zweig's books were banned. The same was said about Thomas Mann's books. Banned, because the authors were of Jewish descent! A profoundly disturbing element entered his mind: DOUBT! He had started reading the ancient Greek philosophers Aristotle, Socrates and Plato. He also occupied himself with early Christian philosophers. He studied St. Augustine and Pascal. The party rally in Nuremberg only confirmed for Hans that the image and model of the Hitler Youth was

very different from his own ideal. Discipline and absolute conformity down to the smallest detail was required by the Party leaders. Hans' ideal was, that each individual should enrich the life of the group with his own contributions, imagination and ideas and each one should be able to freely develop his own talents. What was presented to Hans in Nuremberg as loyalty was nothing more than blind obedience. To Hans, the only valid foundation of loyalty was to be true to oneself.

The spark of tormenting doubt, which had taken hold of Hans, spread to his sister Sophie. After graduating from the gymnasium Sophie's patience and tolerance was really tested. She was required to spend half a year in labor service and another half-year in war-aide service to qualify to enter the university. She deeply rejected the "deadly standardization", the blind obedience to the Führer. Her mind had entered a state of continuous resistance for "wasn't it an unforgivable sign of weak character if she gave the least bit of service to a state founded on lies, hatred, and bondage?" Sophie as well as Hans discovered that they had found a soulmate within their family – their father. On one of their long hikes together, the following question was raised, "Father, what is a concentration camp?" The father explained to them what he knew and suspected and added, "This is war. War in the midst of peace and within our own people. War against the defenseless individual. War against human happiness and the freedom of its children. It is a frightful crime." Hans and Sophie inquired, "Does the Führer have any idea of the concentration camps?" The answer was, "How could he not know, since they have existed for years and were set up by his closest friends? And why didn't he use his power to do away with them at once? Why are those who are released forbidden, on pain of death, to tell anything about what they went through?" Hans and Sophie inquired, "How is it possible that in our country a thing like this could take over the government?" The father explained to them as follows: "In a time of great troubles, all sorts come to the surface. Just recall the bad times we had to live through. First the war, then the difficult postwar years, inflation, and great poverty. Then came unemployment. If a man's bare existence is undermined and his future is nothing but a gray, impenetrable wall, he will listen to promises and temptations and not ask who offers them". It must have been a slow and painful awakening for Hans and Sophie, when they asked their father again: "But after all, didn't Hitler keep his promise and do away with unemployment?" the reply was: "No one denies that. But don't ask about the methods! He started up the munitions industry, he's building barracks. Do you know where that will lead? He could have eliminated unemployment by means of peacetime industries – in a dictatorship that can easily be managed. But surely we are not like cattle, satisfied if we have fodder in our bellies. Material security alone will never be enough to make us happy. After all, we are human beings, with free opinions and our own beliefs. A regime which would tamper with these things has lost every spark of respect for man. Yet, that is the first thing which we must demand from it." And then the father added the following words: "What I want most of all is that you live in uprightness and FREEDOM of spirit, no matter how difficult that proves to be." Hans and Sophie must have felt a sensation of seeing their horizons broadened and at the same time they must have sensed that this expansion of the world brought with it danger and risk. For Hans and Sophie the time of youth had come to an end, passive growth was over they had to establish their own value system upon which they would construct and lead their own lives.

In 1942 Sophie began her studies of biology and philosophy at the university of Munich. After just six weeks in town, she came across a leaflet of the "White Rose". Sophie secretly rejoiced when she read the following sentence in the flyer: "...Nothing is so unworthy of a civilized people as allowing itself to be governed without opposition by a clique that has yielded to base instincts. Offer resistance to the hubris of this subhuman." Those were exactly her thoughts but in a way they also sounded strangely familiar... Where had she heard the words before? An unsettling, chilling suspicion took hold of her. Could Hans have anything to do with the publication of the leaflet? She went to Hans' room and noticed one of Schiller's books on the desk in which a paragraph dealing with the ancient Greek lawgivers Lycurgus and Solon, had been marked: "If a state prevents the development of the capacities which reside in man, if it interferes with the progress of the human spirit, then it is reprehensible and injurious, no matter how excellently devised, how perfect in its own way." Those were also words that were quoted in the leaflet of the "White Rose". The revelation that Hans seemed to be involved or even the possibility that he might be the creator of the "White Rose" was a painfully confusing experience for Sophie: Thoughts of her father, who had already been imprisoned by the Nazis for four months, thoughts of the entire family who was in jeopardy now, if Hans would ever be found out, crossed her mind. By his action, Hans had become an outlaw. Any person associating with him risked his or her life. But could she distance herself from Hans now or did she even want to? Could she deny that she lived in a country in which deception, lies, racism and coercion had replaced freedom and human dignity? Before Hans returned to his room, Sophie had made a conscious decision to join him in his effort of exposing the atrocities of the Hitler regime. She wanted to lead an honest life and intended to create an awareness among fellow students and German citizens in general, that freedom and honor should prevail again.

When Hans finally arrived back home, Sophie confronted him with direct questions "Do you know where the leaflets come from?" Hans tried to be evasive, "These days it's not best to know about certain things, so as not to endanger the lives of others". Sophie countered instantly, "A man can't do a thing like this alone. By yourself you are powerless!" He certainly was powerless against Sophie, who convinced him quickly to let her participate in the fight against National Socialism.

The operations of the "White Rose" were clearly divided into two stages: Four so-called "Leaflets of the White Rose" were produced and distributed in the summer and fall of 1942 and later two "Leaflets of the Resistance" were circulated in January and February 1943. The first of the 1943 flyers was entitled "A Call to All Germans" and the second one was headed "Fellow Fighters in the Resistance". Upon the arrest of Hans and Sophie Scholl on February 18, 1943, a third flyer was found to be in preparation. It was addressed to "German Students". How the "White Rose" operated and what consequently led to the arrest of its members will be presented shortly. I am still in the process of establishing some broader or more general information, which will facilitate the analysis of the resistance movement later on. The activity of the "White Rose" had ceased during the last few months of 1942, since Hans was called to active duty on the eastern front. This, by the way, was a typical pattern for male students. Periodically, they were required to perform military duties at the expense of their studies. The ones who were fortunate enough to survive active fighting would return home and could

squeeze in another semester or one half of a semester before being called again to the front.

Two important incidences have been documented in reference to Hans and I would like to share them with you. The importance lies in the fact that a young man, a German soldier, was quite aware of forced labor practices and also of the tactics of annihilation of Jews. While en route to the eastern front in 1942, the troop train had to make an unscheduled stop at a Polish train station. Close to the tracks, he observed women and girls performing heavy men's work with picks. All of the females wore the Star of David, meaning that they were of Jewish descent. At the end of the group closest to the train Hans noticed an emaciated girl with "small, delicate hands and a beautiful, intelligent face that bore an expression of unspeakable sorrow". Hans, remembering his "Iron Ration" – a bar of chocolate, raisins, and nuts – jumped off the train and slipped his ration into her pocket. With an infinitely proud gesture, the girl took it out of her pocket and threw it on the ground. Hans picked it up, smiled and said: "I wanted to do something to please you". Then he bent down, picked a daisy, and placed it and the package at her feet. In the meantime, the train had started to move and Hans had to hurry to get back on. And then he saw that the girl was still standing where he had left her, watching the departing train, the white flower in her hair. During another unscheduled stop, Hans observed a column of forced laborers. At the rear of the group he noticed an old Jewish man. For a brief moment their eyes crossed and Hans became deeply shaken by the immense suffering these eyes expressed. On impulse he reached for his tobacco pouch, jumped off the train and pressed it into the old man's hands. The quick flash of joy that ignited the old man's eyes became an unforgettable experience for Hans.

When Hans Scholl returned to Munich from the eastern front, the "White Rose" – as mentioned before – concentrated its efforts on publishing and distributing the "Leaflets of the Resistance". The following were members of the "White Rose" in addition to Hans and Sophie: Christoph Probst, a medical student and the only member who was married and had children, Alexander Schmorell and Wilhelm Graf, both of them also medical students. Professor Huber, although not an official member of the group, often met with the students for discussions on ethical, political, and philosophical topics. I am mentioning these members by name because in the end they were the ones who were executed, all by decapitation. The "White Rose" also had quite a few sympathizers, who, after their arrests, received long terms in prison.

The "White Rose" actually started as a discussion group of like-minded individuals. Its members all opposed the Nazi regime with its total disrespect for individual freedom and its proclamation of the elitist-doctrine of the Aryan race and state. During one of their meetings, the word "resistance" was mentioned – later, nobody recalled who had said it first – but the flame was ignited. Hans proceeded in obtaining a duplicating machine. At the same time the use of a small, inconspicuous house had been offered to them by an artist who was on close terms with Hans' circle.

Sophie joined the group after the distribution of the first leaflet and became actively involved in all aspects of its operations. In order to be effective in its campaign, the students realized that the leaflets had to appear in the greatest possible number of

cities. They wanted the largest exposure without leaving any trace of the originators. However, none of the students had previously been involved in clandestine work. Before they made any move, it had to be thought through, checked, and tested. One of their most important objectives was, “do not get caught”. Continuously, they had to be on guard to make sure that all means of covering their tracks were being employed. They packed leaflets that were intended for distribution into suitcases and traveled by train to major cities in Germany: Frankfurt, Stuttgart, Freiburg, Saarbrücken etc... They had to get their material past the numerous army patrols, the police, and even the Gestapo, who ran checks on the trains, including luggage inspections. They often wondered about their fellow travelers: Could one of them already be on their trail? Were they already under surveillance? Each trip was a test of patience and nerves. And each successful distribution trip filled them with a great sense of satisfaction. They were fully aware that they walked a razor’s edge, where joy was clouded by anxiety which was almost beyond endurance.

I would like to quote main thoughts from each of the “Leaflets of the White Rose”. When you hear the quotations, please remember, they were made by students in their early twenties – young individuals whose lives had just started. Individuals whose formative years were spent in the Nazi Germany of Hitler Youth groups.

In the First Leaflet they state “...Who among us has any conception of the dimensions of shame that will befall us and our children when one day the veil has fallen from our eyes and the most horrible of crimes – crimes that infinitely outdistance human measure – reach the light of day?” It is further stated: “By means of gradual, treacherous, systematic abuse the system has put every man into a spiritual prison. Goethe speaks of the Germans as a tragic people, like the Jews and the Greeks, but today it would appear rather that they are a spineless, will-less herd of hangers-on, who now are waiting to be hounded to their destruction. Offer passive resistance wherever you may be.”

The Second Leaflet says “It is impossible to engage in intellectual discourse with National Socialism because it is not an intellectually defensible program. It is false to speak of a National Socialist philosophy for if there were such an entity, one would have to combat it. In actuality, however, we have a totally different situation. At its very inception this movement depended on deception and betrayal of one’s fellow man; even at that time it was inwardly corrupt and could support itself only by constant lies. After all, Hitler states in an early edition of “his” book (a book written in the worst German I have ever read, in spite of the fact that it has been elevated to the position of the Bible in this nation of poets and thinkers): ‘It is unbelievable, to what extent one must betray a people in order to rule it.’” In a later paragraph the students continue: “We want to cite the fact that since the conquest of Poland three hundred thousand Jews have been murdered in the most bestial way. Why do the German people behave so apathetically in the face of all these abominable crimes, crimes so unworthy of the human race?”

In the Third Leaflet the following question is asked: “Is your spirit already so crushed by abuse that you forget it is your right – or rather your moral duty – to eliminate this system? At all points we must oppose National Socialism, wherever it is open to

attack. A victory of fascist Germany in this war would have immeasurable, frightful consequences. The military victory over Bolshevism dare not become the primary concern of the Germans. The defeat of the Nazis must unconditionally be the first order of business.”

In the Fourth Leaflet it is pointed out that “out of love for coming generations we must make an example after the conclusion of the war, so that no one will ever again have the slightest urge to try a similar action. Do not forget the petty scoundrels in this regime, note their names, so that none will go free! They should not find it possible, having had their part in these abominable crimes, at the last minute to rally to another flag and act as if nothing had happened!”

Now, I am coming to the two Resistance Leaflets. In the first one, titled “A Call to All Germans,” the students warn that, “in the East the armies are constantly in retreat and invasion is imminent in the west. Mobilization in the United States has not yet reached its climax, but already it exceeds anything the world has ever seen. It has become a mathematical certainty that Hitler is leading the German people into the abyss. Hitler cannot win the war, he can only prolong it. The guilt of Hitler and his minions goes beyond all measure. Disassociate yourselves from National Socialist gangsterism.” The leaflet closes with the words: “Freedom of speech, freedom of religion, the protection of individual citizens from the arbitrary will of criminal regimes of violence – these will be the basis of a New Europe.”

The last and final leaflet states: “In the name of the German youth we demand restitution by Adolf Hitler’s state of our personal freedom, the most precious treasure that we have, out of which he has swindled us in the most miserable way. We grew up in a state in which all free expression of opinion is unscrupulously suppressed. ‘Philosophical training’ is the name given to the despicable method by which our budding intellectual development is muffled in a fog of empty phrases. Rebel against the National socialist enslavement of Europe!”

By February 18, 1943 work on this leaflet had progressed so far, that Hans and Sophie were able to print and pack several thousand of them in order to deposit them at the university early in the morning before lectures would begin. However, something went very wrong. Hans and Sophie had just left the house, when a friend arrived at their apartment with an urgent warning. Unfortunately, nobody answered the bell and the friend had no idea where to find the two, who, in the meantime, had arrived at the university. They disposed of their leaflets by depositing them in the corridors and by dropping them from the second floor into the entrance hall. Relieved that another mission had gone so well, they were about to leave, when all of a sudden all doors were locked. The custodian had observed them and quickly notified the authorities: The fate of Hans and Sophie was sealed. Arrested by the Gestapo, they were taken to the infamous Wittelsbach Palace, a prison.

And now, the sensitivity and insecurity of the totalitarian system surfaced. To revenge freedom of opinion, the entire mendacious legal system was put into action. The president of the People’s Court, Dr. Freisler, was flown in from Berlin to execute swift

judgment. A few days later one was able to read in the newspapers: "Sentenced to Death for High Treason:

Christopher Probst, age 24

Hans Scholl, age 24

Sophie Scholl, age 21

The sentences have already been carried out." How easy it is for a dictatorship to dispose of human life! You may find it interesting to know that during the reign of the Third Reich freight cars bore the inscription: "6 horses or 40 men." Both of them so easily interchangeable, both of them so easy to use and to abuse. Can you imagine (I am especially putting this question to the parents among you) how terribly tragic and difficult it must have been for Hans and Sophie's parents to lose such wonderful, honest children at the same time?

After Hans and Sophie were transferred to the execution prison, the following was found in their cells: On the back side of Sophie's indictment paper she had written in large letters "FREEDOM" and Hans had scribbled the words of Goethe on the prison wall "Hold out in defiance of all despotism!"

It seemed that with the death of Hans, Sophie and Christoph the matter of the "White Rose" had come to an end. Hans and Sophie, independently – they had no communication with one another – were determined to take upon themselves the blame of all actions of the "White Rose". They had tried to save the life of Christoph for the sake of his children and they also wanted to make sure that the smallest number of people would be drawn into the government net. But it was in vain. The Gestapo had too much incriminating evidence. Shortly after the executions, more arrests were made and three more death sentences for High Treason were proclaimed by the People's Court: Wilhelm Graf, Alexander Schmorell and Professor Huber. In the "Final Statement of the Accused" – it has been reported that these remarks were actually delivered before the court – Professor Huber writes: "As a German Professor, and as a political person, I hold it to be not only my right but also my moral duty to take part in the shaping of our German destiny, to expose obvious wrongs... What I intended to accomplish was to rouse the student body to moral insight into existing serious deficiencies of our political system, to urge the return to clear moral principles, to mutual trust between men. That is not illegal; rather, it is the restitution of legality. You have stripped from me the rank and privileges of the professorship and the doctoral degree summa cum laude which I earned, and you have set me at the level of the lowest criminal. The inner dignity of the university teacher, of the frank protester of his philosophical and political views – no trial for treason can rob me of that. My actions and my intentions will be justified in the inevitable course of history. I have done as I had to do on the prompting of an inner voice. I take the consequences upon myself in the way expressed in the beautiful words of Johann Gottlieb Fichte:

And thou shalt act as if
On thee and on thy deed
Depended the fate of all Germany
And thou alone must answer for it."

The members of the "White Rose" have been described in many forms: Criminals, dreamers, fools, heroes, idealists, honest human beings, and realists. By definition of the law, they were criminals; they did commit high treason. They had taken the oath of allegiance to the Führer to defend the fatherland. However, the Führer became the aggressor! Were they morally bound, for example, to follow the laws that not only deprived the Jews of their political and civil rights, but also of their human dignity? Did they have to remain silent, although they fully understood the purpose of the manipulated language which was used by the fascist regime? By manipulated language I refer to the language which had become impoverished and infested with Nazi ideology and cliches such as "For Thee, oh Fatherland, no one had died in vain!"



Sophie Scholl, Ulm, geboren am 9. 5. 1921,
Studentin der Biologie und Philosophie,
hingerichtet am 22. 2. 1943
(DECAPITATED FEB. 22, 1943)



Hans Scholl, Ulm, geboren am 22. 9. 1918,
Student der Medizin,
hingerichtet am 22. 2. 1943
(DECAPITATED FEB. 22, 1943)