

I owe you my life

The story of Anna and Hermann Scheipers.

Moral courage and trust in God under two dictatorships



LWL

Für die Menschen.
Für Westfalen-Lippe

Documentary, approx. 30 min., German/English/Polish, b/w and coloured

Interview, approx. 28 min.; ROM layer with texts and images
DVD with booklet, 2011 (D 152)

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DVD Booklet
by
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published by
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1. Witnesses of two dictatorships – an introduction to the DVD

As time goes by, it is becoming more and more difficult to find eye-witnesses of the crimes committed in the Nazi concentration camps. The Catholic priest Hermann Scheipers, born 1913 in Ochtrup near Muenster, is one of those who experienced the inhuman brutality of the Nazi terror system first hand. This DVD shows how his courageous sister Anna helped him to survive.

Dachau Concentration Camp, July 1942: Reverend Hermann Scheipers, interned for nearly two years because he provided pastoral care to Polish forced laborers, collapses on the roll-call square and is put in the so-called "invalid block". He knows that this is a death sentence, because every week prisoners are transported from this block to the nearby gas chamber in Hartheim. Hermann Scheipers, who is regarded to be an "enemy of the state", was initially sent to the police prison in Leipzig in 1940 and then dispatched to the Dachau Concentration Camp. His "offense"? He had prepared a mass for Polish forced laborers who were not allowed to participate in regular church services in his former parish in Hubertusburg, Saxony. Without the help of his twin sister Anna, Hermann Scheipers would probably not have survived the horrors of the Nazi tyranny. In August 1942, the young woman responded to an encoded cry for help and managed to gain admittance to the SS Reich Security Office in Berlin. There, she boldly claimed that the entire Muensterland was in turmoil because members of the clergy were murdered in the Dachau Concentration Camp. And then the impossible happened: Intimidated by the self-confident demeanor of the young woman, the Gestapo officer in charge ordered Hermann Scheipers' retransfer to the "regular" camp. Anna's courageous intervention did not only save the life of her brother but also that of several hundred other clergy members interned in Dachau.

This event is the key scene of a film biography produced in 2002/03 by Munich director David Menzhausen, commissioned by the LWL Media Center Westphalia and the MDR and supported by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Muenster. Menzhausen accompanied the twins from their birthplace Ochtrup to Dachau and then to Saxony, where Hermann Scheipers had worked as a pastor since 1937. After the Second World

War he returned to Saxony, but it did not take long before he clashed with the new communist authorities. The Stasi ordered no less than fifteen spies to observe the upright man who worked as a pastor in Schirgiswalde near the Czech border until 1983. Despite the almost impenetrable "Iron Curtain", his sister remained close to him. This is another impressive part of history portrayed by the film.

During their entire lives, the twins Anna and Hermann Scheipers have fought against intolerance, discrimination and injustice, and they have done so with incomparable courage, personality and great trust in God. For their struggle they were awarded the German Federal Cross of Merit in November 2002. Today Reverend Scheipers lives in Ochtrup again; his sister died in Muenster in 2007. Their stories are exemplary for some important chapters of the political, social and religious history of Germany between 1933 and 1989. The twins' exceptional gift to remain charming, natural, and quick-witted – even in front of the camera – renders this 2003 production a truly extraordinary document of the time.

The LWL Media Centre Westphalia has now published this historical document on DVD for the first time. Benno Hörst, a member of the LWL Regional Association Assembly who comes from Ochtrup himself, initiated the publication. This new edition does not only contain the original film, which is now divided into chapters, but also some additional material. Since the interest in Reverend Scheipers reaches far beyond the borders of Germany, the DVD contains an English and a Polish version of the film, along with the German original "Dir gehört mein Leben". As an additional bonus, the disk contains four segments of an interview with Hermann Scheipers, each five to ten minutes in length. In the interview, conducted by a member of The Historical Place Villa ten Hompel in 2004, the Reverend talks in detail about his experiences under the Nazi-regime. The DVD is completed by a ROM layer with texts and images which may be used to supplement historical education.

Special thanks go to the Historical Place Villa ten Hompel for providing the sequences of the interview and to the diocese Muenster for its financial support of the edition.



Anna and Hermann Scheipers, approx. 1935. Picture: Private

2. The Scheipers Twins – Biographical Dates from the Lives of Hermann Scheipers and Anna Schweppe

Hermann Scheipers

July 24, 1913	Born in Ochtrup / Westphalia, son of the Post Office Clerk Heinrich Scheipers and his wife Elisabeth; four siblings, among them his twin sister Anna
1918-1932	Primary School in Ochtrup, Secondary School in Rheine
1932	Graduation

- 1932-1936 Study of Theology at the University in Muenster
 1936 Enrollment in the seminary of diocese Meißen in Schmochtitz near Bautzen
- Aug. 1, 1937 Ordained to the priesthood in St. Peter's Cathedral in Bautzen by Petrus Legge, the Bishop of Meißen
 Position as Chaplain in Hubertusburg near Leipzig
- 1938 First encounter with the Gestapo for organizing a conference for the forbidden Catholic youth group Quickborn
- Oct. 4, 1940 Arrested and imprisoned in the Leipzig jail due to "friendly relations with members of an enemy ideology"
- Mar. 28, 1941 Transfer to the Dachau KZ; inmate number 24255
- Aug. 13, 1942 Saved from the gas chamber by his sister's intervention
- April 27, 1945 Escape during a forced death-march of the Dachau KZ inmates
- June 1945 Return to Ochtrup
- Aug. 1945 Chaplain in Gronau (Diocese Muenster)
- April 1946 Return to the Diocese Meißen as Chaplain in Radebeul
- Sept. 1946 Chaplain in Berggießhübel near Pirna
- April 1950 Chaplain in Freital near Dresden
- 1953-1962 Chaplain and Priest in Wilsdruff near Dresden
- 1962-1983 Priest in Schirgiswalde
- Apr. 22, 1973 Nomination as honorary Canon of St. Peter's in Bautzen
- 1983 Retirement
- 1990 Return to Ochtrup
- 1997 Honorary citizen of Hubertusburg / Wermisdorf
- Nov. 25, 2002 Awarded the Cross of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany
- April 14, 2003 Nomination to Honorary Papal Prelate by Pope Johannes Paul II for special services for the Catholic Church
- Nov. 21, 2003 Honorary Citizen of the town of Schirgiswalde
- Aug. 1, 2007 70th anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood
- 2009 Award of the honorary citizenship of the town of Williamsport (USA), reception by the German ambassador in Washington
- May 11, 2012 Award of the German Federal Medal of Merit, first class

Anna Schweppe

- July 24, 1913 Born in Ochtrup/ Westphalia, daughter of the Post Office Clerk Heinrich Scheipers and his wife Elisabeth; four siblings, among them her twin brother Hermann
- 1918-1926 Primary School in Ochtrup, Secondary School in Rheine
from 1926 Housekeeper for her uncle Hermann Kuhlmann, Spiritual Lecturer at the Paulinum in Muenster; house-keeping support in the home of her parents; training as kitchen aide in monastery Bentlage near Rheine
- Oct. 1940 Visit to her brother in the police jail in Leipzig
1941 Marriage to Bernhard Schweppe (civil ceremony)
- Aug. 13, 1942 Journey with her father to the Reich Security Head Quarters in Berlin. Her persistence in the discussion with the Gestapo officer Dr. Bernsdorf saved her brother and many other priests from the gas chamber.
- 1943/44 Several illegal meetings with her brother in Munich and Dachau
- Sept. 18, 1945 Marriage to Bernhard Schweppe (church ceremony)
- Nov. 11, 1946 Birth of her son Georg
- June 28, 1949 Birth of her son Hermann
- Nov. 11, 1952 Birth of her daughter Elisabeth
- since 1957 Moved to Sudmühle
- 1987 Papal honor "Pro ecclesia et Pontifice"
- since 1994 Confined to a wheelchair
- Nov. 25, 2002 Awarded the Cross of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany
- Dec. 8, 2007 Anna Schweppe dies in Muenster
- Jan. 18, 2008 The organization "Muenster against Nazis" requests permission from the city of Muenster to name a street in honor of Anna Schweppe
- Feb. 13, 2009 The Catholic Women's Organization of Germany supports the request
- Oct. 9, 2009 Decision by the district council East of the city of Muenster to name a street in the district of Sudmühle "Anna-Schweppe-Weg"

3. "Here, You Are Defenseless, Without Dignity or Rights" – The Dachau Concentration Camp and its Barrack for Priests.

Like no other place of commemoration, the former concentration camps of the 'Third Reich' are a symbol for the prosecution and elimination of different-minded and so called "abnormal" people. In our collective memory, the words 'Dachau' and 'Auschwitz' have become striking synonyms for the inhuman actions of the Nazi-Regime. The Dachau concentration camp, where Hermann Scheipers was imprisoned from 1941 to 1945, was one of approx. 25 main camps built by the Nazis after 1933. Only 20 kilometers away from the city center of Munich, it was the only German concentration camp that existed throughout the duration of the NS-Regime.

Unlike Auschwitz and other concentration camps in Eastern Europe, Dachau was never an extermination camp. To the public, Dachau had always been presented as a model camp where inmates lived under supposedly moderate and well-ordered conditions. Just like the euphemism 'protective custody', the positive depiction of Dachau with its "Open Camp Days" and sugarcoated documentary reports aimed to mask the actual conditions and murders in the camps and appease the critics in Germany and abroad. A total of 206,000 people from all over Europe were imprisoned and tortured in Dachau; many of them were murdered. At first especially unionists, communists, social democrats and other political opponents of the Nazis were imprisoned. Later, the victims were mostly Jews, Sinti and Roma, homosexuals, malingerers, and citizens of German-occupied countries. Dachau was a model camp in many ways, but totally different from what the Nazis presented to the public. With its attached SS-training camp, Dachau was used to "teach" SS-guards and functionaries in methods of brutality and to test the limits of cruelty in this legal vacuum, removed from any outside control.

As soon as they arrived, the inmates were greeted with the scornful words "here, you are defenseless, without dignity or rights," as Reverend Scheipers recalls. This phrase was accompanied by blows and kicks, slaps in the face, insults, humiliations and torture. There might be no other definition to describe the nature of a concentration camp better than this threat. Each and every person interned in a concentration

camp was reduced to their sheer work capacity and an inmate number, excluded from the "national community" and considered to be "scum". Nobody could escape the brutality, exploitation and despotism of the SS-guards and the so-called "Kapos", inmates selected to monitor and watch the other prisoners in exchange for certain privileges. When prisoners tried to resist or attempted to escape, they received harsh punishment; some were even murdered. The inmates were systematically destroyed, both physically and mentally. Endless hours of standing attention for role-calls, sadistic punishment, sexual abuse, and executions were all part of the everyday life of a Dachau inmate. Because they lacked adequate clothing and suffered from the meager food supply, the bitter cold, diseases, and unbearable hunger were the harsh reality of concentration camp life.

In Dachau, as in most concentration camps, the SS adhered to the principle of "extermination through labor". Half-starved, the prisoners had to perform heavy labor for long hours until they collapsed from exhaustion. Those who dropped from fatigue or were too sick to work were in grave danger because they were not considered worthy of being fed. The misery was compounded by the constant flow of new prisoners who needed to be housed and thus made it easy to replace those who had died.

The murder of more than 41,000 inmates was caused not only by systematic killings and pseudoscientific medical experiments where prisoners were abused as human test objects, but also by the harassment and the cruelty of the SS men, miserable nourishment, exploitation and extremely hard work. Since Dachau itself did not include a functioning gas chamber, the weak and the sick were moved to a block reserved for the invalid and then transported to the nearest extermination camp in Schloss Hartheim near Linz. In 1942 alone, 3166 inmates, among them 336 priests, were sent to their death on these transports.

Even though the camp had originally been designed to detain only 5,000 inmates, all in all, more than 63,000 inmates were temporarily imprisoned in Dachau and its sub-camps. Especially during the last months of the war, when large numbers of prisoners from other camps were transferred to Dachau, the camp was severely overcrowded and the conditions for the inmates were absolutely unbearable. These ca-

tastrophic conditions were the breeding ground for diseases; illnesses like typhoid reached epidemic proportions, adding many deaths to the thousands who died from hunger and the cold.

When US-Americans were approaching the concentration camp in late April 1945, the evacuation of the Dachau camp was ordered. Without concern for the sick and weak inmates, the population of almost 7,000 prisoners was ordered to march towards the Alps. These "death marches" claimed the lives of many captives who died of exhaustion or who were shot when trying to escape. On April 29, 1945, the concentration camp Dachau was finally liberated by the 7th US-Army. Since 1965, more than 20 million visitors from all over the world have come to the memorial on the premises of the former concentration camp Dachau.

Christians of all confessions still are an often underestimated group of opponents and victims of the „Third Reich“. The totalitarian demands of the NS-regime did not tolerate any opposing ideology, and fighting the church was one of Hitler's main objectives from the very beginning. After denominational parties, associations, community and youth groups, newspapers and schools were eliminated, more and more clergymen became the targets of the brown persecutors. As representatives of the church-bound population, they were exposed to especially strict observation by the party and the Gestapo. Whenever they followed their religious conviction and preached against the persecution of Christians, racial hatred, and the killing of disabled persons; or when they organized forbidden church work with young people and offered pastoral care to non-Germans, they were automatically considered to be enemies of the state by the Hitler-regime. Thousands of clergymen were harassed and interrogated, had their homes searched, were reprimanded and fined during the twelve-year National Socialist rule. While harsh punishment was a rare consequence at first, the NS-regime resorted to a draconian penalty on a large scale after the onset of the Second World War: the arrest and internment in a concentration camp.

In December 1940, after negotiations with the church, "Reichsführer SS and Chief of the German Police" Heinrich Himmler ordered that all clergymen who were detained in prisons or camps of the "Third Reich" should be transferred to the Concentration Camp Dachau where they were to be grouped in a special block. About 2,800 clergymen from

twenty-one different nations were housed in barracks number 26, 28, and 30. More than 90 percent of them were members of the Catholic Church, among them were clergymen of all ranks, from deacon to bishop. More than two thirds of them came from Poland, almost 450 from Germany and Austria.

A few well-known clergy, who were considered to be Hitler's "personal inmates", were housed in a separate prison in the camp, the so-called "honors bunker". Among these inmates were Johannes Neuhäusler, who later became the auxiliary bishop of Munich, and Martin Niemöller, a pastor from Westphalia and the co-founder of the Confessional Church, a Protestant schismatic church opposed to efforts to Nazify the German Protestant church.

Starting in September 1941, all priests of the "German Reich" were separated from the others and moved to Block 26. The remaining inmates, mostly Polish clergymen, were perched together in the terribly overcrowded barracks 28 and 30. After removing the fences between the barracks and by revoking clergy privileges, which were now only available to German clergymen, these two blocks became a part of the regular camp again. In January 1941 a makeshift chapel was installed in Block 26 to allow only German – not Polish – clergymen to celebrate holy mass. In December 1944, Karl Leisner was ordained to the priesthood in this chapel. Having never fully recovered from the ailments induced by his imprisonment, he died in August 1945, just a few months after his liberation. Pope John Paul II beatified Karl Leisner in 1996.

The inmates of the block for the priests were not spared from forced labor. They primarily had to work on the camp plantation, where they had to do heavy field work from dusk to dawn in every kind of weather. Since human labor was cheaper than the maintenance of horses, the inmates spent days pulling ploughs, seeders and barrels. The clergy were also the preferred targets of the sadistic attacks of the SS-men who insulted, tantalized and harassed them. Altogether, 1,034 clergymen died under these circumstances in Dachau, among them 868 Poles and 94 Germans and Austrians.

In view of the ordeals and stories of these victims and survivors, Bishop Johannes Neuhäusler was an early advocate for a specifically Catholic

place for prayer and commemoration in Dachau. On August 5, 1960, the Todesangst-Christi-Kapelle (Mortal Agony of Christ Chapel), located in the middle of the former Lagerstraße, was consecrated. During the Eucharistic World Congress, this chapel became an important religious symbol for the initiative of survivors, relatives, and friends of NS-victims to create a memorial on the site of the former concentration camp. For them, the memorial bell of the Dachau chapel still rings at 3 o'clock every afternoon.

4. Sources and Materials in the ROM layer

The following text and image sources are available at the ROM layer of the DVD as pdf (for printing with explaining text) and jpg (for presentation and integration into other files):

- M 1: curriculum vitae of Hermann Scheipers
- M 2: curriculum vitae of Anna Schweppe
- M 3: exceptional letter by Hermann Scheipers to his mother, Aug. 16, 1942
- M 4: Objects with history – Hermann Scheipers' knife in concentration camp
- M 5: Objects with history – Hermann Scheipers' inmate' badge and number in concentration camp
- M 6: Objects with history – picture taken secretly in concentration camp
- M 7: Objects with history – Hermann Scheipers' identification card in 1945
- M 8: A day in the 'block for priests' 26 in the concentration camp Dachau
- M 9: Anna-Schweppe-Weg, Muenster
- M 10: Living history – Hermann Scheipers

5. Bibliography

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6. Film details and acknowledgement

Film: I owe you my life

Script and direction: David Menzhausen

Editing: Saskia Barthel, Markus Köster

Advisory service: Benno Hörst

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Camera assistant: Thomas Moormann

Sounds: Sabine Lipp, Detlef Schöning

Sound assistant: Mareike Gröning

Editing: Diana Feuerbach

Mixing: Artur Kubiczek

Postproduction: bubbles

Music: Herbert Riesenhuber, Sonoton

Supported by: Diocese Muenster, diocese Dresden-Meißen, town Schirgiswalde, Karl-Heinz Stolle

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An interview with Hermann Scheipers, 2004

Conducted on behalf of the Historical Place Villa ten Hompel Muenster
by: Rachel Fabritius (Interview), Rolf Schnieders (Camera) and Lukas
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Editing: Jonas Köhne

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Voice-overt artist English comment: Thomas Zander

Polish translation: Ewa Gill

Voice-overt artist Polish comment: Bartosz Dudek

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7. Structure of the DVD

1. I owe you my life (approx. 30 min.)

Chapter 1: "I owe her my life" – introduction (1.42 min.)

Chapter 2: Police prison Leipzig (2.48 min.)

Chapter 3: Concentration camp Dachau (7.22 min.)

Chapter 4: Secret visits (5.44 min.)

Chapter 5: Flight and homecoming (4.32 min.)

Chapter 6: Pastor in the GDR

Chapter 7: Retirement/Look back (1.24 min.)

2. Interview with Hermann Scheipers (approx. 28 min.)

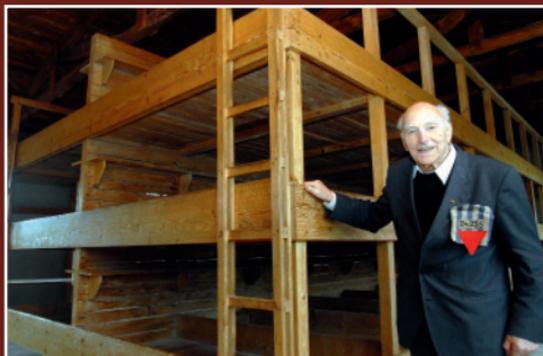
Sequence 1: national Socialism and struggle between church and state (6.09 min.)

Sequence 2: In the sights of Gestapo – detention and imprisonment (7.09 min.)

Sequence 3: Defenceless, without dignity or rights – inside the Dachau concentration camp (9.34 min.)

Sequence 4: Not alone – family support (5.14 min.)

3. Materials for education (ROM layer)



Hermann Scheipers with his inmate's badge and number in Dachau. Picture: Hermann-Josef Pape

"A sense of security in death gives composure in life."
Romano Guardini, maxim of pastor Hermann Scheipers

"Sitten bliewen!" (Remain seated in Westphalian Dialect)
Anna Scheiper's order to her father during a conversation at the SS Reich Security Office in Berlin in August 1942.

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