
❖ The Passionist Heritage Newsletter ❖

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Reclaiming History Researching the Untold WWII Story of Father Viktor Koch, C.P.

by Katherine Koch

Memorial Day weekend 2004 saw the dedication of the World War II Memorial on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. On the one hand, we are fortunate to have so many people still alive who can help us make sense of World War II historical documentation. On the other hand, social commentators and reporters have made us aware of the contribution of the many World War II veterans who have died. Both of these situations have led to an increased interest in research on World War II. As a result, worn letters and photos have come out of family storage. Others have tried to find information from a variety of historical sources.

Anyone who has tried to find and put together the pieces that make up such an historical puzzle can identify with the following essay by Ms. Katherine Koch. In May 2004 Ms. Koch and her father Gary Koch came to use the Passionist Historical Archives to find out more about their relative Father Viktor [the German spelling] Koch. In 1945, this Passionist priest saved the town Schwarzenfeld, Germany from United States military forces who had liberated the town and had plans to partially destroy it! Background on this can be found at www.viktorkoch.com.

The value of Ms. Koch's essay is that it explains the personal dimension in doing archival research. Most people who have used archives can identify with this. Others who have not been to archives may take this as an opportunity to understand the value of archives on the national, state, and local level.

In the end Katherine Koch's essay is a living testimony to a World War II veteran. In reading it we understand why the dedication of the World War II Memorial carried so much emotion. We also appreciate what makes up the pieces of an historical puzzle. So often the pieces have to be found. Never in

one place, they are gathered together by random events such as a conversation, phone call, or newspaper report. This leads to emails or correspondence between people who have a common historical interest. This in turn leads to archives. Archives help us know and respect the truth of history.

Editor: Fr. Rob Carbonneau, C.P.

When we peruse old family photo albums and look upon formally posed, smiling relatives, an inevitable pattern emerges. We recall vivid details about our parents and grandparents, the humorous anecdotes they shared about life's lessons, the memorable, uplifting moments we spent in their cherished company. For those ancestors who lived and died before our birth, however, the details of their lives elude us, and we find ourselves challenged to remember facts, complex genealogical relationships, and a handful of relevant dates. Eventually their names fade beyond recollection. We encounter them from time to time in crinkle-edged, black-white photographs, their unfamiliar, eternally preserved faces bearing eerie familial resemblance, yet each individual's essence – his distinctive character, favorite aphorisms, life struggles and accomplishments – is lost in time's lengthening shadows.

My great-granduncle Father Viktor Koch, C.P., an unsung Passionist hero who peacefully defied Nazi Germany within the claustrophobic confines of a two-by-four meter church sacristy, nearly slipped beyond family knowledge. I never knew he existed. To my father, the revered Passionist missionary was a vague name that silently staggered along the eroding edge of early childhood memories. Dad vaguely recalled overhearing his parents chatting about a Passionist missionary who worked in Germany, but specific details half-heeded forty years ago had long since faded from memory. While visiting inquisitive family members in Sharon, his northwestern Pennsylvania hometown, Father Viktor discussed the Nazis, life behind enemy lines, the Allied advance, and

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long-awaited liberation, though he neglected to mention the day he protected Schwarzenfeld's civilian population from enraged American soldiers who misjudged his innocent flock. As a result, his courageous efforts were virtually unknown outside the Bavarian village he loved and defended.

To our great fortune, we reclaimed this extraordinary piece of our family heritage from Mr. Edwin Pancoast, an American veteran who remained stationed in Germany after World War II. In 1997, Mr. Pancoast visited old friends in idyllic Schwarzenfeld, Bavaria. While reminiscing with Frau Zita Mueller, his gracious German hostess, Ed generally avoided discussing the war years out of consideration and a tacit understanding that this delicate topic revived painful memories for the German people. Unlike younger generations who viewed the war through history books, documentaries, and grainy monochromatic pictures, Ed and Zita, reluctant eyewitnesses to conflict and Nazi fascism, still bore heartrending memories of tragedy and horror. On this highly unusual occasion, however, they revisited that somber chapter in their lives. After reflecting upon her own experiences, Zita told her visitor about a courageous Passionist priest who saved Schwarzenfeld's citizens, intervening on their behalf when American troops threatened to destroy the town.

Father Viktor's story entranced Ed. Upon returning to his home in Maryland, he visited the National Archives at College Park and searched the European Theater of Operations (ETO) holdings for Zita's humble spiritual hero. He received helpful information from numerous contacts, including Viktor's grandnephew, Dan Bauer, but the trail soon ran cold. Father Viktor saved Schwarzenfeld over fifty years ago, and important eyewitnesses capable of describing events as they unfolded had already passed away. Ed's last package, addressed to the Sharon Historical Society, carried fading hopes of the city acknowledging its native son.

My maternal grandmother, a longtime Sharon resident, called our house in June 2003 and explained that she'd read an editorial in the local newspaper — *The Sharon Herald* — revealing unknown details



about Father Viktor Koch's World War II era mission. "Is your father related to this priest?" she asked me. I confessed that I'd never heard the name before, though the possibility existed. Subsequent investigation into our family history verified that Nikolaus Koch, who received the name Father Viktor in 1896, was the eldest son born to our German immigrant ancestors Viktoria and Nikolaus Koch. Energized by dreams to forever memorialize Father Viktor's heroism in a magazine article, page-turning book, or History Channel Docu-Drama, my family embarked upon a quest for historical research. Seven months later, the four of us packed into my parents' Saturn, trekked across Pennsylvania's mountainous terrain, and after an eight hour trip, we arrived in Union City, New Jersey, the home of the Passionist Archives.

Archival Archeologists

Bundled in rectangular slate gray boxes that are

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categorized under the titles, “Buckley Files: German Foundation” and “St. Mary’s, Dunkirk,” carefully preserved correspondences, the oldest written in elegant penmanship over a century ago, eagerly wait to whisper their own fascinating stories. Although worn and yellowed over time’s slow passage, they reveal vibrant insights into their writers — their fears, hopes, future plans — and the world in which they lived. My father and I examine archival records like fervent archeologists excavating the remnants of an ancient civilization lost in time’s unfathomable depths. We’re conducting a dig, not for bones or clay potsherds, but for scattered factual fragments bringing Father Viktor’s little-known World War II story to life. The motivation driving our search transcends a simple desire to reconstruct an extraordinary episode in Nazi Germany’s disturbing history. We’re also hoping to learn about this perpetually solemn-faced ancestor we’ve just identified in old family photo albums. Who was Father Viktor Koch? What was he like? What tragedies and struggles did he confront during his lifetime, and how did they contribute to his character?

Before I explored the Archive’s holdings, I regarded Father Viktor Koch as an engaging, yet distant acquaintance, the chief character and protagonist in this unknown World War II drama I hope to bring into public consciousness via articles and an historical fiction novel. My limited perspective changes the moment I realize I’m holding letters that my great-granduncle touched, typed, and signed nearly sixty years ago. Within the five minute span required to evaluate each letter’s contents, the thoughts and events forever locked in a past era unexpectedly flow into the present, and while peering through this fleeting window, I catch an unforgettable glimpse of Father Viktor. These original documents are memorials in their own right. Like Washington D.C.’s glistening granite World War II monument, they bring history to life and bridge the expansive temporal gap in a way that electronic copies never can. When I’m holding Viktor’s letters, I sense only one aspect separating us: time. And at this moment, I perceive sixty years diminishing to an insignificant thing scarcely worth acknowledging.

My intent gaze travels across yellowed, manually typed correspondences that are as delicate as bible paper, swishing and rustling when I flip pages. The tone characterizing their content is strikingly direct. Concise. Blunt.

An ensuing discussion with the Archive Director Father Rob Carbonneau, our guide through Passionist history,

clarifies a point escaping my attention. “In those days there was no reply button,” he reminds me. “When you sent a letter across the Atlantic, you never knew when a response would come, and this necessitated a certain economy of words and a forthright sincerity that sounds harsh to the modern ear. In their day, they interpreted it differently.”

Father Rob reveals pertinent historical details lingering in the background. In 1922, Fathers Viktor Koch and Valentine Lehnerd venture across the Atlantic to establish a new German-Austrian Foundation - a formidable endeavor for that era, considering the severe housing shortages and disastrous inflation crippling Germany’s postwar economy. During the same decade, the Passionists launch missions to China, an exotic land ripe for conversion to Christianity. The Order invests a significant portion of its human and financial resources in this latter effort; meanwhile, Fathers Viktor and Valentine’s burgeoning German Foundation sits impatiently simmering on a back burner, awaiting American funding. By nature, my great-granduncle is an unwavering mover and shaker, a man stubbornly devoted to completing the task before him. He loathes waiting idly. Father Viktor and I both possess, in no small measure, a characteristic Koch tenacity that soars against adversity: the higher the mountain, the greater our desire to conquer it. Upon that realization, I feel an abrupt pang of sympathy for the Father Provincial in America, Father Stanislaus Grennan, C.P. He’s doing his best, struggling to negotiate between Rome’s decisions and a domineering one man army named Viktor Koch.

I reach for the next letter. I pause, realizing what I’m forgetting. While I’ll eventually write a biographical work discussing Father Viktor’s tireless efforts to establish the Passionist Order’s German-Austrian Foundation, my primary focus is Schwarzenfeld and Nazi Germany. The unwary novice researcher learns a lesson about historical investigation: each piece of history contains an unexpected, hidden power that sweeps away the reader and entangles her within its fascinating contents, whether or not they’re relevant to the immediate topic. Although this is a tangent in my search for Father Viktor’s World War II experiences, I receive an insight into my great-granduncle’s personality and discover common ground.

I glance toward the wooden research table on my left, where my father stands leaning over a Dell laptop, a softly humming Lexmark copier-scanner, and the

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Europe 708 box of photographs. Father Viktor's familiar face – his usual intent expression, thick lips drawn in a tight, unyielding line - paints across the laptop's sleek plasma display. I pause, watching eighty-year-old history meeting current technology, and contemplate how our state-of-the-art scanner records only text, images, and color variations. An ineffable tactile magic clings to the original document, and that can never be duplicated.

Unraveling Mysteries of Schwarzenfeld

While exploring World War II's intricate tapestry, amateur historians often conceptually reduce interwoven factors and conflicts to their simplest threads. Good against evil. Allies vs. Axis. Americans and Nazi Germany. As a U.S. citizen educated in American school systems, I tended to view world events through a nationalized perspective, and once the history lesson concluded, I infrequently pondered dry facts, or envisioned what eyewitnesses from alternative viewpoints experienced behind enemy lines. Perhaps this explains why I find Father Viktor's unique story so compelling. Learning that an American priest – my ancestor - vouched for innocent German civilians challenges all preconceived expectations.

When examining Father Viktor's story within Nazi Germany's broader context, I encounter intriguing aspects justifying further research. In 1933, Hitler launches an organized campaign against the Catholic Church and other religious orders, prohibiting non-Germans from exercising acts of ministry. Although his fellow American Passionists flee Germany, Father Viktor remains in Schwarzenfeld's gilded pilgrimage church, the Miesbergkirche, where he says daily mass and hears confession through the World War II years without being arrested – an incredible fact verified by three contacts in Schwarzenfeld. "How was that possible?" I wonder. "Did the Schwarzenfelders protect Father Viktor? Did they subscribe to Nazi ideology, or did their deeply rooted Catholic beliefs shield them from indoctrination? Why did Gestapo agents arrest Father Paul Böminghaus C.P., Viktor's steadfast companion?" Over the past two months, I'd mulled over these critical questions during my waking moments, and considered possible answers before falling asleep each night. These unsolved mysteries flood my mind again when I lift a gray cardboard lid covering the "Buckley Files" box, which holds original correspondences exchanged between America and the fledgling German-Austrian Foundation.

While preparing for my trip, I studied numerous resources analyzing Adolf Hitler's ascension to power and additional factors contributing to the Holocaust. During the post World War I era, enormous war reparations stipulated in the Versailles treaty cripple Germany's economic recovery. By 1923, inflation soars - 4.2 trillion Deutchmarks equals one American dollar. Germany obtains a crucial financial lifeline from U.S. industry, which heavily invests in its devastated business sector, but this dramatic reprieve is short lived: the 1929 Stock Market crash precipitates a worldwide depression that terminates critical money flow, utterly shattering Germany's tenuous economy. The Deutchmark's plummeting value leaves the population starving and unemployed.

Against this desolate backdrop, Fathers Viktor and Valentine discover Schwarzenfeld's stately pilgrimage church dedicated to the Most Holy Trinity, which they deem an ideal location for the German-Austrian Foundation's third monastery. Already possessing \$200,000, they announce a momentous decision to construct the Miesbergkloster in Schwarzenfeld and hire its destitute community, plus numerous vagrant artisans roaming the Bavarian countryside in an earnest search for employment. Schwarzenfeld's predominantly Catholic population considers this miraculous event a twofold blessing. In a religious sense, they're honored by the Passionist Order's presence; from a secular perspective, the Passionists are furnishing economic relief and enabling Schwarzenfelders to support their impoverished families. I suspect that Father Viktor's timely arrival marks the beginning of an extraordinary relationship between Schwarzenfeld's population and the Passionists. Whether by conscious intention or good fortune, he provides for the population's material needs. When fortune turns against Father Viktor, they reciprocate and provide for his.

In 1941, Nazi party officials seize the Miesberg novitiate monastery and use its facilities for Rhur Valley's "Children of the Countryside" program, an organization that relocates children inhabiting areas subject to frequent air raids. Rather than acquiescing to Nazi occupation, Father Viktor defiantly takes residence in the Miesbergkirche's flower sacristy, which he shares with Father Paul Böminghaus. The Schwarzenfelders help their Passionist fathers bear this cross by delivering cooked meals, an act potentially resulting in disastrous consequences if vigilant Nazi informers learn the truth. Schwarzenfeld's predominantly Catholic population is protecting an American. A political enemy. A priest

who, despite Hitler's decree, exercises pastoral duties for the local population. What empowers them to maneuver within the dark, miniscule spaces behind Nazi rule?

Perusing Box 708 Europe's contents, I obtain undeniable evidence of this suspected relationship between Father Viktor and Schwarzenfeld's citizens in The Chronicle of the German Foundation:

"Attention must be drawn here to the fact that in the history of no other German foundation of our Order did the people cooperate with and support us so generously and wholeheartedly as did the people of Schwarzenfeld and the neighboring villages. And this good will has continued even in the dark days after the monastery had been taken from us, and it was dangerous to give us any help. But in spite of it all, they said: 'As long as we have something to eat, you won't starve.'"

The Buckley Files box offers up one more valuable gem, a five page letter Father Viktor composed in 1946, discussing his wartime experiences. I skim through dense, manually typed text, and once I realize that I've discovered Father Viktor's personal recollections, I begin reading carefully:

"Excluded from our Monastery and wonderful garden," my great-granduncle writes, "we took up our abode during the day in the Altarboys Sacristy, a two by four meter room, where we [ate], cooked, etc. A very charitable lady offered to cook for us, that is [she] sent the dinner, which she did for four full years until we got back into our Monastery..." I pause, reflecting. If the people of Schwarzenfeld are delivering meals to Fathers Viktor and Böminghaus, they're keenly aware that the Passionist priests are living in the Miesbergkirche flower sacristy. Moreover, as Reich citizens, civic duty requires them to inform local Nazi leadership. Did the Gestapo ever realize that two Passionist priests were secretly residing on the church's premises? "[Moving our belongings to the church flower sacristy] had to be done on the quiet," Viktor writes, "so that the Nazis would not know that we were to live there ... The Nazi powers were outwitted, we lived there without them [knowing] where we [were]."

Father Viktor's letter also sheds light upon another research question: why did the Nazis arrest Father Paul?

"Great accounts had been in the Italian newspapers about certain apparitions of the Bl. Virgin to children at Bergamo in Italy. One of our Fathers in Italy, a German, [pressed into] the German army wrote us a letter and described the affair. This letter was shown by Fr. Paul to certain people who made copies of it...The letter also

stated that July the 13th, something would happen that would be a source of Joy to the whole world – this should be a sign from the Bl. Virgin. The affair came to the notice of the German Gestapo – the secret State Police. The result was that Fr. Paul was arrested by the Gestapo...The police also remarked that the people talked about it, that Hitler should be murdered, etc. Strange to say it was really the first date set for the assassination of Hitler, which however had been postponed for a week."

While writing this five page letter to his superiors in Rome, Father Viktor only vaguely refers to Schwarzenfeld's salvation, and with admirable humility befitting a Passionist Provincial, he downplays his role in protecting the town. "I was given credit as the man who saved Schwarzenfeld from being shot to pieces," my great-granduncle explains. "Be this as it may, not only the first days, but for a year and more I was kept busy, for all in the whole surrounding district came to me for advice...I was glad to give help where I could, because those who came were [not] the Nazis, but those who suffered under their regime."

Conclusion

"During the time when Matins is chanted in our Middle European monasteries," Father Viktor's obituary reads, "the small community of Holy Trinity Retreat, Schwarzenfeld, was kneeling at the bedside of its dying father, the Founder of the Passionists in Austria and Germany. And as the chanting of Lauds was finished, our beloved father had finished his earthly course, had died peacefully in the Lord. He, who had loved the Observance so much, who, together with the only priest left in the monastery during the war years, rose faithfully for Matins and Lauds, was privileged by God to die at just this time."

When Father Viktor passed on to his heavenly reward nearly fifty years ago, few people outside Schwarzenfeld realized that the German-Austrian Foundation's celebrated Provincial rescued a small Bavarian town, spiritually nurtured its emotionally scarred population, and provided for their physical welfare before, during, and long after World War II's dramatic conclusion. Schwarzenfelders refer to him as their Passionisten Ordenspriest, or 'Passionist Medal Priest,' an endearing and rather apropos translation, for he possessed as much courage as the valiant American soldiers who stormed Normandy's beaches and liberated Europe from Nazi tyranny. While studying correspondences our heroic ancestor penned over a half-

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Companions: Religion and War?

by Fr. Rob Carbonneau, C.P.



In many ways it is pensive for us to acknowledge that, from one generation to the next, religion and war have been companions. Certainly this remains true in 2004.

During World War II it became common place for chaplains to give spiritual comfort to soldiers. We only have to read Jesuit Father Donald F. Crosby's *Battlefield Chaplains: Catholic Priests in World War II* (University Press of Kansas, 1994) to appreciate their service.

No doubt many of us have heard the phrase, "there are no atheists in a foxhole." On the one hand such faith might have emerged during the trial of combat. On the other hand, it may have emerged through participation in a spiritual retreat.

The above picture is such a retreat conducted by Passionist priests. It shows the soldiers' dramatic renewal of their baptismal vows at a Catholic mission held from May 17-24, 1924 at the Field House, Fort Knox, Kentucky. The priests were Fathers Charles

Gaskin, C.P., Andrew Ansboro, C.P, Stephen Paul Kenny, C.P., and Terence Brody, C.P.

One way to reflect on this picture is to do so in the context of Katherine Koch's article on Father Viktor Koch, C.P. In 1942 Koch's Catholic witness as a priest was hidden from the German military. In 1942 his brother Passionist priests in the above picture can express and encourage Catholic witness in public forum.

Through the puzzle of history imagination might lead us to ask the following question. Did the strong Catholic faith of Father Koch and that of any United States Catholic soldiers find a moment of zealous conflict? Did not Father Koch believe it just to save the town of Schwarzenfeld? Did not any Catholic soldiers believe it just to destroy part of the town?

We might pause and ask how religion and war exist as companions.

century ago, my father and I learned dates, events, and facts, which we expected to find waiting inside those neatly organized storage boxes. Yet, we also encountered something unexpected: in Father Viktor's clear, candid words, we experienced his dogged perseverance, shared his wry humor, and witnessed his unshakable faith shining through the darkest hours. In the end, we recaptured more than Passionist and German history, more than knowledge of the Koch family heritage. We reclaimed a lost fragment of ourselves. My family and I will always be grateful to the Passionist Archives for giving us that remarkable opportunity.



Archives Notes

- Fr. Rob Carbonneau presented a paper at the Passionist Associates Weekend, June 12, 2004 in Jamaica, New York. The topic was *Passionist-Lay Involvement: A Historical Reflection*
- Fr. Rob Carbonneau has just published the following article: "Coal Mines, St. Ann's Novena, and Passionist Spirituality in Scranton, Pennsylvania, 1902-2002." It was published in *American Catholic Studies* Volume 115 No. 2 (2004): 23-44.
- *We Are the Passionists* is a new CD just issued by the Passionists of St. Paul of the Cross Province (eastern United States). It provides an historical and contemporary understanding for Passionist ministry. For more information contact the Passionist Historical Archives.
- Father John O'Brien, C.P. has published a book review of *The Voices of Gemma Galgani: The Life and Afterlife of a Modern Saint*. This book, written by Rudolf M. Bell and Cristina Mazzoni and published in 2003 by University of Chicago Press, was reviewed in *The Catholic Historical Review* (April 2004): pp 334-335.



Did you know?

No Fireworks!! —The Fourth of July: not always a Passionist day of celebration!

It has always been customary for Passionist Provincials to send out Circular Letters to the members of the province on a variety of subject.

John Thomas Stephanini, C.P. was a three-term provincial of St. Paul of the Cross province: 1875-1878, 1881-1884, 1884-1887. Common sense seems to indicate that soon after he was elected provincial in August 1875, Passionists in the United States read the following—the first of three points—in an undated Circular Letter.

“The celebration of the National Holy-Day—the Fourth of July, must be restricted within the bounds of religious propriety and decorum. It must be kept, as a holy-day or general recreation day in accordance with our customs and at the discretion of the Superior of the Retreat. Nothing profane, noisy or distracting may be allowed. All fire-works, firing of guns, pistols and all explosives of whatever sort are strictly forbidden to our Religious and within the boundaries of our property attached to the Retreats. It ill-becomes the Religious of the Passion and Cross of Jesus Christ to celebrate any Festival by such means and by such worldly and obstreperous demonstrations. It was first introduced amongst us or rather forced on us, during the late sectional war, as a proof of northern patriotism, but it is time that it be stopped and that our Religious celebrate the Nation's feast in a manner becoming our holy profession. The Very Rev. F.F. Rectors will use their authority to that effect.”

In Passionist Historical Archives, Union City, New Jersey. Box 1 Provincial Administration of the 19th Century. Folder: John Thomas Stephanini Circular Letters 1875-1898 & undated.

Maintaining audio-visual material in current format is important. Older material becomes unreadable when the equipment to play them becomes unavailable. We can convert a video from VHS to DVD for \$20. Can you help?

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Layout: Anita Lewis

It is the intention of the Commission to present material that will be both interesting and informative. We want to make better known the story of our Congregation and especially of our own Province; the Passionists, lay people and benefactors who made it, the immense labors they undertook in proclaiming the Gospel of Christ's Passion, and their successes and failures. We also want to look at the present situation of the Province through the eyes of Faith to try to ascertain what lessons, if any, history may be able to teach us as we try to understand our present moment and the future.

We hope to make this an **international** newsletter and so we welcome contributions from our readers of **any** Province. If you have any interesting stories or reflections or even questions that you are willing to share with us, we beg you to do so.

The Passionist Heritage Newsletter

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