“Better not write but don’t forget me”

Those were among the last words her friends heard from alumna Mildred Fish before she died at Hitler’s hands.

By Sandra Garson

She never got an obituary. On May 15, 1943, three months after her execution, a tiny item appeared inside the news pages of The New York Times. It said the official March 10 Gazeteer of the German Reich announced confiscation of the estate of Mildred Harnack, née Fish, born in Milwaukee, Wis. The Nazi justification was “communist activity.”

Actually, Mildred Fish Harnack died because she was American. The United States had entered the war against Adolph Hitler and the frustrated Führer had been flailing for retribution when she came to his attention. She and her German husband were Gentiles. The anti-Nazi coterie they inspired had been caught trying to help the Allies win. When Hitler reviewed her posttrial file, he demanded an immediate death sentence.

Pastor Harald Poelchau, who saw her last, says five and a half months of imprisonment and interrogation had bled Mrs. Harnack’s familiar blonde hair white. She looked twice her forty years and was too physically broken to remain upright. Yet, with Nazi guards on either side, she went calmly, head high, to the Brandenburg guillotine. Behind in her cell she left painfully scribbled verses from Shelley’s “Adonais” and Whitman’s “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed.”

Mildred Harnack was the only American civilian to be publicly murdered inside the Reich for fighting Adolph Hitler, and she was not a mere victim of circumstance. What became her journey to oblivion through the prison compound at Plötzensee had begun innocently and optimistically twenty-one years before when young Mildred Fish, daughter of William and Georgina of Milwaukee, went to the University of Wisconsin. Under tutelage of William Ellery Leonard, the eminent member of the faculty of the English department, she discovered Goethe and what she would later term the German philosophers’ feeling for the wonder and quality of human life. Leonard was a poet who had translated Lucretius and Beowulf and some of Goethe. He placed the emerging writers of this country into historical European context: literature to him was the apex of social criticism— it mirrored the big issues facing humankind.

To a serious coed studying languages and writing poetry—she’s listed as a contributing editor on the campus’s Wisconsin Literary Magazine—Leonard was an inspiration. Mildred Fish remained at Wisconsin after graduation in 1925 to pursue a master’s degree. In the fall of 1926, she became an instructor in Literature. Her subject was American writers, but her special passion was the fine art of translation.

On campus in her senior year she had met the young German scholar Arvid Harnack—von Harnack, actually, but his family looked on the von as an affectation and used it only on official records—newly arrived on a three-year Rockefeller Fellowship to study Economics. The recent triumph of communism in Russia had cata-


Above: Mildred Fish’s graduation picture in the 1925 Badger Yearbook. Opposite: This photograph is believed to have been taken at Plötzensee prison in 1943. Mildred wrote this postcard, from a London visit in 1939, to her friend Clara Leiser in New York. Miss Leiser says the H.M. referred to was a mutual friend, being “not untrue to Meredith” referred to a graduate seminar the two women had taken here on the works of Meredith and Hardy.
January 12, 1939.

Dear Clara,
Here for a few days. I've seen H.M.'s books at last and like it. And I think of you at last and often think of you, thanking you at heart for your warm kindness of two years ago. An interesting woman psychologist may bring greetings to you from me some day not very far off.

Better not write but don't forget me and don't be angry. Power to you! With love ever.

M.
pulted Marxism into the sort of cavalier revolutionary idea that inspired an ascending generation anxious to improve the world; Harnack's dissertation, written for Professor John Rogers Commons, was "Pre-Marxist Labor Organizations in the United States." Developing a humane economic system was for him one of the big issues.

Mildred Fish and Arvid Harnack, like all intellectually inflamed students, shared a passion for social justice and the whirlwind of precedent-smashing theories unleashed by the new century. Both have been described as gregarious, compassionate, curious and tactful. After their marriage in 1926 their living room — at 210 Princeton Avenue in the University Heights area — became a lively salon where the heady ideas of the Jazz Age were freely bartered.

With his fellowship completed, Arvid returned to Germany in 1928. For a year Mildred taught at Goucher College in Maryland, near her widowed mother, and in 1929 followed her husband to the University of Jena. By all accounts she, who'd grown up in one of the most German of America's big cities, loved her adopted country and fluently spoke its tongue. But she never abjured her American citizenship and always spoke English to her husband.

For two years both Harnacks pursued doctoral studies, first in Jena, then at the University in the small town of Giessen, probably because Arvid found there an economic research group which was comparing the Depression crisis in Capitalism with the new centralized economy of Russia. Mildred had grants from the German Academic Exchange Service and the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, both of which still exist today. In 1931, alarmed and alarmed by the festering Nazism in Giessen, the couple moved to Berlin. Arvid found a post on the American desk at the Ministry of Economics and Mildred began teaching American literature at the University of Berlin. To her students she introduced Faulkner, Hawthorne, Wilder and Wolfe, all of whom she thought had a feel for the wonder, quality and "big issues" of American life.

The handsome Harnacks quickly became familiar figures in the capital's cultural and social life. Mildred was a regular guest at the American Embassy during the four-year ambassadorship of William E. Dodd, and with Dodd's daughter Martha, she staged the tea parties for which it became legendary. The belief is that, characteristically, Mildred was among the first to alert the Americans at the embassy to the nightmare of National Socialism. Moreover, she and Arvid, like many contemporaries, saw the Great Depression in the U.S. and Germany as a chance to shift toward a more humane system, to forge a just social order from international pandemonium. They'd witnessed in the intimacy of Giessen the bully Stormtrooper tactics, and, by now, book-burning at the University of Berlin and the persecution of Jews by the Economic Ministry. They recognized Nazism — the response of the right — as the dangerous antithesis of their democratic ideal.

Arvid's roots in the liberal German elite, Mildred's roots in Jefferson and Emerson, their mutual commitment to sharing, all turned the Harnack living room at Woyrschstrasse 35 into the lively international salon their Madison parlor had once been — only times had changed. By 1936 the salon pursued the single topic of how to best overcome the Nazi scheme of things and improve the world. Now, however, the heady exchange of ideas was lethal, for the Nazis had no tolerance for debate, disputation or doubt — all punishable by a concentration camp or worse. Yet the couple was not deterred.

In 1937 Mildred visited America where she lectured on "European Responses to Contemporary American Literature" at the UW and other universities, and contracted with publishers of two best-sellers, Drums Along the Mohawk and Lust for Life, to translate them for the German market. While in New York, she stayed with her UW friend, Clara Leiser '24. Later, back in Berlin when prospects for foreigners and dissidents evaporated, Arvid bought Mildred passage on a ship home, but she refused to leave. She continued her work of typing and distributing the leaflets he wrote, arranging secret meetings and maintaining contact with their co-conspirators. Arvid came to the U.S. alone for a visit in the summer of 1939.

Certainly, the situation being what it was, family and friends must have urged both to get out of Germany permanently. There is the impression that the two talked about their underground work. That would seem to be a mistaken impression. Clara Leiser knew nothing about it until she visited them in Germany in 1939, when Arvid said only, "some of us have to stay to keep an eye on things." More telling is a letter from Mildred's sister, Harriette, to Miss Leiser, in which she observes somewhat irritably, "Mildred's and Arvid's work in Germany I know nothing of except by hearsay, and that has been conflicting and quite unsatisfactory." And, after their death, "Neither of them ever gave us an inkling of their political activities, though Arvid spent most of the summer of 1939 in our Chevy Chase home. In fact, (another) brother-in-law has difficulty in believing Arvid was not a Nazi, as he was always convinced he was." Even in the face of sacrifice, isolation, censorship and mass arrest in Germany, Mildred persevered. Because America was still a neutral nation she was able to continue teaching, probably still at the University of Berlin, but also at the Faculty for Foreign Studies. This was run by SS Colonel Franz Six for army officers, no doubt to prepare them for cultural ease in the world they planned to conquer. Mildred taught with a passion, coughing under the heading of "literature" the writings of Abraham Lincoln along with the most democratic

Honoring Mildred Harnack

A group of Milwaukee citizens is attempting to have a public building named for her there. More information on that project is available from Arthur Heitzer, 606 West Wisconsin Avenue, Suite 1706, Milwaukee 3203.

At Marquette University's Haggerty Art Museum through June 1, an exhibit: John Heartfield — Photomontages of Nazi Germany, is dedicated to her.

In March the Wisconsin legislature passed a bill which makes her birthday, September 16, a day to be recognized in Wisconsin schools each year.

10 / THE WISCONSIN ALUMNUS
thoughts of her beloved American authors. Certainly she must have found the school an ideal source of additional information to pass along to the resistance underground; she ran one such group of an unidentified sort. And she used her translating work to carry resistance messages and leaflets outside of Berlin.

A vivid had by now added to their circle a dashing young lieutenant from the Air Ministry, Harro Schulze-Boysen, who with his wife Libertas, was a fiery anti-Nazi activist bent. With the war’s outbreak, the group began publishing The Inner Front, a biweekly underground newspaper of progress reports, relevant discussions on alternative political systems, poetry, practical advice and compassionate words for conscripted foreigners and persecuted Germans. Historians would later refer to the circle as the Harnack Schulze-Boysen Group.

It’s now understood this anti-Nazi network consisted of the Harnacks’ inner circle of intellectuals plus an outer circle of activists who secured several transmitters and — once Hitler invaded Russia — began clandestine communication of any military information Lieutenant Schulze-Boysen and his cohorts could ferret. The broadcasts continued until August 30, 1942 when, upon the arrest of an authentic Russian spy in Berlin, the transmitters were discovered aboard a flotilla of pleasure boats out on the Wannsee.

Arrest of the “outer circle” began arrest of the “inner” one; 118 people in all, and because the transmitters had been code-named after musical instruments, because they beamed to the East — where the war was being fought almost entirely — the Gestapo nicknamed the entire network “The Red Orchestra” or Rote Kapelle. The appellation has allowed Western history to smear every member with a Communist label, but Mildred’s close friends maintain she was definitely not associated with any Communist Party group. When finally, forcibly assembled for the first time, the clique was actually international and democratically varied from conservatives to Communists, one of the only anti-Nazi covens egalitarian enough to allow women leadership, perhaps to accommodate the woman from Milwaukee. In almost equal proportion it consisted of soldiers and civil servants, artists and writers, students and professors, artisans and laborers. Most members were young.

Twenty-two were released; seventy-five were tortured and summarily tried by the infamous People’s Court, the Harnacks among them.

“Why did such first-rate, talented, clean-living individuals in such prestigious positions commit and sacrifice their lives?” asks survivor Gunther Weisenborn, the journalist who became a famous West German playwright. “Their last letters give us their motives. They wanted to save the world from Hitler, they wanted to end wars in order to save Germany. Their resolve was not lightly undertaken; some struggled hard before making their com---

---

A Witness’s Report

An account of the trial of Mildred and Arvid Harnack was found in the UW Archives. The document, written in German by Arvid’s cousin Axel von Harnack, appears to be from a magazine called The Present Time, and probably ran in about 1948. It was translated for us by Tellervo Zoller, an employee of Memorial Library. Here is her version of it:

“Axel von Harnack says, ‘while it is for future generations to determine how much Germany can be forgiven,’ he hopes the reports of Mildred’s and Arvid’s work will help convince the world that there was a resistance movement there.

“In September 1942 Axel von Harnack worked as librarian at the Berliner Staatsbibliothek. He was called by the Secret State Police because after Mildred and Arvid were arrested they had named them the relative to represent them (an attorney was not allowed). Axel was not told the reason for the arrest, except that it was a very serious matter and should be kept secret. Only the closest relatives were to learn about it. Everyone, including the ministry where Arvid worked, was told that the couple was abroad on business.

“The two cousins were not close personal friends, but Mildred visited the library frequently and Axel often had lunch with her. He was very fond of her and admired her greatly. ‘Her work fulfilled her completely — unfortunately she was denied children — and she was warmly attached to her husband, she admired him deeply. She firmly trusted his wisdom and his professional excellence. She was totally devoted to him.’

“After the arrest the author was never allowed to visit personally either of the Harnacks, but he he was able to deliver letters from relatives (whose support endured through the entire ordeal), books and some food and luxury items.

“At first it seemed that Mildred would be released soon. Later Axel was told by the Secret Police that she was lying, denying facts she had to know. It became more and more clear to the police that she had been deeply involved in conspiracy herself.

“Just before the trial, the family learned that the charges were conspiring with Russians through Swedish intermediaries. The family was given a brief list of available attorneys. They had difficulty getting any of them to accept the case. No spectators were allowed in the courtroom. Arvid was sentenced to death. Mildred got six years at hard labor (instead of twelve years sought by the prosecution). After hearing her sentence Arvid beamed at her. He explained to their defense attorney that this would save her life, because she could survive the punishment or would surely be freed earlier. The relatives agreed. They made plans for her care at the penitentiary.

“Five months later, Hitler overturned the court’s verdict and ‘re-opened’ Mildred’s case. Axel and the family were (officially) warned to do nothing. The same court then sentenced Mildred to death without any new evidence or witnesses.”

May/June 1986 / 11
mitment. They knew they could only lose; they were ready for that and they lost everything."

Arvid Harnack was sentenced to death for treason and garroted at Ploëtzensee on Christmas Eve 1942. Mildred was sentenced to six years of hard labor (i.e. a concentration camp), until Hitler personally ordered a change in the court’s decision. When the distinguished Harnack family tried to intercede on her behalf, they were cruelly threatened with reprisals. Mildred herself remained calm, tearful only when she was given a picture of her mother.

Mildred Elizabeth Fish Harnack was summarily beheaded on February 16, 1943. On line 27 of the Ploëtzensee entry form, "What do you plan to do when your time is up?" she had written: "To translate the finest German poetry, like Goethe's, into English for a larger audience. The work's already underway." She spent her final hours scribbling on the cellblock wall Goethe’s poem “Vermächtnis” (“The Legacy”) in the English language.

Mildred Harnack received a posthumous recognition from the Soviet Union and has been richly honored with an archive of her literary and professorial accomplishments at Humboldt University in East Berlin, formerly Berlin University. There, too, her name lives on via an annual prize awarded to the top student in American Literature. An elementary school in East Berlin has been named for her. It is located on Schulze-Boysunstrasse, the street which honors the young lieutenant who was so much a part of the Harnacks' underground efforts.

Mildred's death was finally made public on September 27, 1946 when The Observer, the weekly newspaper of the American Office of Military Government for Germany, covered a mass rally in Berlin honoring the 15,000,000 victims of National Socialism. Under the rally banner, To Honor The Dead and To Remind The Living, some of the more special lives lost were illuminated in speeches. Hers was one of them. Then abruptly the Iron Curtain segregated Berlin and brought apartheid to the Allies.

Much of this information appeared originally in Wisconsin Alumnus in August 1947, written by Charles Branch '49.

The family was given a brief list of available attorneys. They had difficulty getting any of them to accept the case.

---

Lines from "To and From The Guillotine"

By Clara Leiser '24

1946:

So now I sit here with this letter, friend,
And read—read and tremble—tremble and stare
At words I do not want to comprehend,
For if I do I must let go the fair
Hope I held for long—that fate might bend
In your favor still, let you share
The fall of evil incarnate, witness the end
Of slaughter, watch the weary nations prepare
The scaffolding of peace, start to mend
Countless broken lives, fill out spare
Bodies, heal spirits torn; lend
Ultimate meaning to carnage. Now I dare,
Accepting this proof that as earthling your life is done,
To record its valor, for others to build upon.

I never knew a room could be so still—
Or a heart. Who would think that tears,
So often proved how futile in these years
So big with grief—could once more fill
Tired eyes, long since drained by stark
Accounts of what at last was done to those
Whose quiet labor, as most dangerous foes
To Nazidom, demanded the cautious dark
Of secrecy as absolute as death.
As noiseless too. Of what I knew, no breath—
Lest it endanger you—could dare find voice.
This doubles grief, and yet, I had no choice.
But now your Nazi-guillotined throat makes mine
Cry out, to let your silenced bravery shine.