

Rotary under Nazi Rule

Learning from the Past
for a Better Future



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A PROJECT LONG OVERDUE

The existence of Rotary and controversial politics can lead to a delicate situation: How should Rotary deal with clubs in a country where its government violates democratic rights and discredits principles of humanity? When and if democracy returns, can Rotary clubs be rebuilt or re-established without the help of former supporters of the old regime?

Looking at Germany during the Nazi period (1933 to 1945) and the time after World War II might provide answers applicable to other countries of today.

In autumn of 2015, a group of nearly 60 German Rotarians, among them university historians, began a long overdue research project into the history of Rotary in Germany from the 1920s to the 1950s. This booklet is an interim report on the findings.

From 1925 on, Rotary clubs were chartered in Austria and Germany, according to Rotarian principles. When Hitler became German Chancellor in 1933, however, Rotarians were discriminated by the Nazis for political or racial reasons and had to leave their clubs. Many of them were dishonored and persecuted unless they fled from Germany in time. Others were put into prison or concentration camps. Some were outright murdered.

As to the Rotary organization itself, there was little resistance. Up to 1937, when the German clubs dis-

banded, shortly before the Nazis would ban them, members who had left their clubs in 1933 were soon replaced by persons not discriminated by the Nazis. Rotary kept growing until 1936.

During World War II, the Nazis banned Rotary in all countries that Germany had conquered. Intellectuals were persecuted and Jews murdered. After 1945, many Rotarians who had survived the war helped restart Rotary. When in 1949 the Federal Republic of Germany was established, the old clubs were rechartered and new ones founded. However, in East Germany, where a Communist regime had taken over, this had to wait until 1989, when the Iron Curtain fell and Germany was reunited.

In a confusing era of conflicting Rotarian values and the horrors of the Nazi regime, our organization must review its level of responsibility for growth in a time of horrific discrimination and degradation. We must accept the consequential contradiction of what Rotary stands for and how this was ignored. Today, it is time for Rotarians to express their deep regret and, as an organization, to apologize. It is time to look into a painful past even as we build greater hope for Rotary's future. More than ever, whenever Rotary perceives inhumanity, the *Four-Way Test* is a political obligation. In the end, Germany has shown how a new Rotarian community can and must evolve. Ours is an organization that can never again ignore our commitment to humanism and democracy.



VON HAMBURG BIS OFFENBURG

- 1927: Hamburg,
Frankfurt/Main
- 1928: Köln, München,
Stuttgart, Dresden
- 1929: Berlin, Nürnberg,
Chemnitz, Plauen,
Leipzig
- 1930: Baden-Baden, Aachen,
Magdeburg, Düsseldorf,
Mannheim, Breslau,
Halle, Saarbrücken,
Görlitz
- 1931: Heidelberg, Braun-
schweig, Wilhelms-
haven, Karlsruhe,
Danzig, Pforzheim,
Darmstadt, Wiesbaden,
Heilbronn, Liegnitz,
Bremen
- 1932: Mainz, Remscheid,
Hannover, Kiel,
Zwickau-Glauchau
- 1933: Erfurt, Stettin, Freiburg,
Garmisch-Partenkirchen,
Wuppertal
- 1934: Friedrichshafen-Lindau
- 1935: Bielefeld
- 1937: Krefeld, Schweinfurt,
Offenburg

*The first members of RC Chicago
in 1905: Sylvester Schiele,
Paul Harris, Hiram Shorey,
Gus Loehr (from left)*



Only Those Who Know Their Past
Can Shape Their Future

In 1933, when the Nazi Party rose to power in Germany, an ideology destroyed the very principles and practices of every form of democratic thinking and action.

How did Rotarians, their clubs in Germany as well as Rotary International deal with this ideology and its practical consequences? This question as to Rotary's behavior in such a situation is particularly important in these times of rising nationalism and racism. How does one react when minorities are oppressed and persecuted and when human as well as civil rights and liberties are restricted? How does Rotary behave when its own members are discriminated?

It took decades for Rotary clubs in Germany to face their own history. In 1962, Past District Governor Friedrich von Wilpert presented a comprehensive document entitled 'Rotary in Deutschland'. The *German Council of Governors*, however, prevented it being published. It did not appear until twenty years later. This was symptomatic of a time where tackling the 'brown' past was still taboo. For critical readers today, the book appears too apologetic. It also lacked footnotes and referrals to 'protect' contributors.

Since then, preconditions for research into Rotary's history in Germany have fundamentally improved. Documents from many German clubs in 1937,

confiscated by the *Gestapo*, were found by the Red Army and were transferred to Moscow. In 1957, most of these documents were handed over to the East German government. When Germany was reunited in 1989, some 25.000 documents became accessible for research. Since then, investigations have increased with differing intensity, depending on the historical interests of individual members or clubs. Often investigations are made in connection with anniversaries or lectures.

One such investigation was initiated by Gideon Peiper (RC Ramat Hasharon) in 2012. He and the *German-Israeli Inter Country Committee* asked German clubs, rechartered after the war, for information on the fate of their Jewish members. However, a general and thorough investigation into the Nazi period, was delayed until an appeal by Prof. Kurt-Jürgen Maaß was published in Rotary Magazin of October 2015, resulting in the formation of a group of some 60 interested Rotarian researchers. They collected publications concerning the Rotary clubs of the 1930s, analyzed documents in archives and attempted to offer a comprehensive overview of the subject, as shown by this preliminary report to the Hamburg Convention.

In 2018, a very thorough investigation into the history of two single clubs in particular was pub-



After World War II, Rotary denied its sympathy for the Nazi movement, even by falsifying photographs (left) or by cutting off the swastika (right)

lished by Prof. Paul Erdmann, completing a decade of research in both Stuttgart and Munich. Also, a research data base has been set up, collecting and combining all available information on some 2.800 Rotarians, 56 clubs and more than 2.500 references to documents of Rotary in Germany and Austria before 1937. A bibliography lists more than 170 publications, while biographical data, including portraits, are added to a

,digital memorial' honoring Rotarians that were persecuted by the Nazi regime.

Dealing with Rotary history is also of relevance beyond Germany's borders. The behavior of Rotary as an institution and its individual members is important world wide. Rotary must never be silent when fundamental rights are ignored and human rights are violated. The principles of Rotary also require statements on politically sensitive developments. What happened between 1933 and 1937 with Rotary and Rotarians in Germany should never happen again.