Francis Quinault

Rotary Under Fascism

Talk given to the Rotary Club of St Andrews, Scotland, on 04.11.20

One of my daughters lives in Germany and the other in Spain. Because of that I have come to know both those countries rather well in recent years and have visited Rotary Clubs in our daughters' home cities, Berlin and Salamanca. That set me wondering what happened to the Rotary movement, in Germany when Hitler was in power and In Spain under Franco. I shall deal with each country in turn and then conclude my talk with some general remarks about the challenges faced by Rotary because of fascism and what lessons there may be for the future.

I started to explore this topic in 2019 and the timing was serendipitous because a book, *Rotary under Nazi Rule*, had just been published. It is an interim report of a major research study, begun in 2015, by 60 German Rotarians, many of whom are university historians.

The Rotary movement reached Europe from America in 1911 and by 1925 there were 30 European Clubs, including one in Vienna. Its arrival in Germany was delayed by the First World War and the country's subsequent instability but in October 1927 Wilhelm Cuno became the founding President of the first Club, in Hamburg. His appointment was controversial because he had been Chancellor of Germany for a short time during the Weimar government. Nevertheless, Paul Harris wrote in person to congratulate him.

More German Clubs followed in quick succession. By the end of 1932 there were already 36 and when Paul Harris visited one of the new ones that year he spoke about the contribution Germany had made to culture and civilisation throughout the world and the part that German immigrants had played in the development of his own country; as exemplified by the fact that two of the other co-founders of Rotary, Silvester Schiele and Gustavus Loehr, were of German descent. French and German Rotarians had just set up a Comité Franco-Allemand and it must have seemed to Harris, as he planted a friendship tree in Berlin, that one of Rotary's key aims – international goodwill and world peace – was being advanced in Germany.

Everything was about to change, however, when, at the beginning of 1933, Hitler persuaded the ageing President Hindenburg to grant him emergency powers, enabling him to rule as Führer with no need for parliamentary approval. So began the burning of books, the persecution of Jews and so forth. The consequences for Rotary were twofold. On the one hand, some Rotarians were among those middle-class Germans, such as civil servants and academics, who began applying to join the Nazi party, either out of conviction because of the failures of the Weimar government or out of self-interest. On the other hand, some of the senior Nazis became increasingly suspicious of Rotary, which they portrayed as a secret society, controlled by Americans, Freemasons, Jews and pacifists, that would betray Germany's national interests.

The Rotary Clubs themselves responded in various different ways. Heidelberg disbanded after just two years because a majority of its members opposed Nazification and the exclusion of Jewish members. But that was an exception: most tried to conform in one way or another. Swastikas and the Hitler salute began to appear at meetings. The minutes of Rotary Club Zwickau stated that its members must be of Aryan descent and committed to caring for 'Germanness'. RC Mannheim asked its Jewish members to resign voluntarily and when two refused it disbanded but immediately re-formed, now with just 13 of what were previously 41 members. Munich, birthplace of the Nazi party in 1920, was so eager to conform that it expelled not only its Jewish members but also Thomas Mann, who was a founding member and had been hailed as a model Rotarian after he won the

Nobel Prize for Literature in 1929. He was deeply hurt, as confirmed by his diary. Stuttgart tried public relations, printing a flyer that maintained that Rotary was not a secret organisation and had nothing to do with Freemasonry or Marxism; instead, duty to the Fatherland and one's neighbours was at its core. In similar vein, the German Rotary magazine *Der Rotarier* proclaimed that the Rotarian ideal of service was identical with National Socialism.

Several factors help to explain the readiness of so many Rotarians to ingratiate themselves with the Nazi party. Party membership was becoming essential for career advancement; perhaps this was a price worth paying for the stability and prosperity that Hitler seemed to be bringing to the country; qualms about the exclusion of Jewish Rotarians could be assuaged by the sophistry that they no longer qualified, having been deprived of their professional status; and although Rotary International knew that Jewish members were being expelled it sheltered behind its apolitical credo rather than intercede on their behalf.

Moreover, even though Himmler, as Minister for the Interior, had attempted to prohibit dual membership of the Nazi party and of Rotary in 1933, coexistence appeared possible for several more years. Himmler was overruled, probably by Hitler himself who wanted to portray Germany as peace-loving whilst rearming in secret. That pretence ended with the illegal occupation of the demilitarised Rhineland in March 1936, after which officers of the armed forces and the SS were ordered to leave Rotary. Civil servants were next and as soon as the Berlin Olympics, with what Hitler had hoped would be their propaganda value, were over in August, the official organ of the Nazi party, *Völkischer Beobachter*, declared that party members – *Parteigenossen* - could no longer belong to Rotary, or indeed to any international organisation. Up to the last moment some Rotarians sought for reconciliation, like the Governor of RC Berlin, who pledged "imperturbable loyalty" to Hitler, assuring him that no Jews were left in German Clubs and suggesting that an outstanding party member, such as Hermann Göring, could be made the honorary chairman for Rotary in Germany, just as Mussolini was in Italy.

It was all to no avail, however, and a meeting of Club leaders in Berlin resolved that all German, and Austrian, Rotary Clubs must disband by 15 October 1937. There were 47 Clubs in Germany at that point, with several more in the process of formation. By then 552 members had already left, some by choice but others forced out, including 141 Jews, some of whom later committed suicide or perished in the death camps.

It is known that some Rotarians continued to meet informally – in what came to be called *Freundeskreise*, ie Circles of Friends, after the disbandment but military call-up, bombing and surveillance by the Gestapo made this increasingly difficult.

One of the first people to ask Rotary International to re-charter a Club after the war was Konrad Adenauer, who had been a member of RC Cologne for 5 years until he was expelled in 1933. He did so in June 1945, when he became Lord Mayor of Cologne but before his election as the first Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany. However, many Rotarians in countries that had been occupied by Germany were, understandably, not yet ready for this. Re-chartering began in 1949 and was made possible by the conclusion of the process of denazification: that is to say, of the identification by the occupying powers - America, Britain and France – of people who had held office in the Nazi party and were to be executed, imprisoned or at least banned from public office in the new Germany. Incidentally, previous membership of Rotary was sometimes used by people seeking to exonerate themselves from complicity with Nazism.

Some of the 29 Clubs that were re-chartered between 1949 and 1951 had already begun meeting as Circles of Friends. New Clubs also appeared, especially in smaller towns than hitherto, and as of last

year there were nearly 1100 Clubs in Germany with over 56,000 members. Some of those are in what was, until the wall came down in 1989, East Germany, where first the occupying Russians and then the communist government had continued to ban Rotary.

Salamanca, where my younger daughter lives, is about 120 miles NW of Madrid and 60 miles from the border with Portugal. It is a beautiful city, famous for its university which is over 800 years old. The broadcaster and former politician, Michael Portillo, visited Salamanca in his most recent series of *Great Continental Railway Journeys*. If you saw that episode, you may recall that his father, Luis Portillo, was a professor at the university who supported the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War, but in a non-combatant role for fear of injuring any of his six brothers, who were all supporters of Franco.

The Spanish Civil War began with a military uprising in July 1936 when Franco was serving in Spanish Morocco. Hitler supplied many of the aircraft that enabled the conspirators to reach the mainland. Franco soon emerged as the leading figure, assuming the title of *Caudillo*, and his Nationalist forces eventually defeated the Republicans after nearly three years of bitter fighting. He remained in power until his death in November 1975.

Like Hitler, Franco saw himself as a saviour, rescuing his country from an international conspiracy of Jews, Bolsheviks and Freemasons. However, for Franco, freemasonry was the paramount concern because most Jews had been expelled from Spain long before. He blamed the masons for Spain's decline from its Golden Age and the loss of its overseas Empire, and his obsessive hatred of freemasonry was virulent and lifelong. He assembled a mock Lodge as a warning to the public, which, ironically, is now a small masonic museum in Salamanca.

The same building houses the Archives of the Civil War, which Michael Portillo visited to see the file compiled about his father by the Franco regime. Also there is the card index assembled by a Catholic priest, Juan Tusquests Terrats, who shared Franco's obsession with freemasonry. It contained 80,000 names, even though it is known that there were no more than 10,000 masons in Spain before the war and fewer than 1,000 by the time it ended. Anyone on that index was in great danger: suspected masons were regarded as traitors and many were executed, often without trial and sometimes after appalling torture. To give just two examples, 30 members of the Lodge in Salamanca were shot and in Huesca, where there were only 5 masons before the war, 100 men were shot for supposed membership.

There were terrible atrocities on both sides during the Spanish Civil War, which Sir Paul Preston has chronicled in chilling but objective detail in *The Spanish Holocaust*. For those on the losing side, including alleged masons, the purges continued after the war with the introduction of the infamous Law for the Repression of Freemasonry and Communism, which was used to justify debarment from public office, harsh prison sentences and even executions.

What has this to do with the Rotary movement? There were 20 Rotary Clubs in mainland Spain before the civil war, all were suppressed when it began and none was rechartered until 1977, two years after Franco's death. Franco seems to have regarded Rotary as little different from freemasonry and mistrusted it as another secret society with international links. Rotary is indeed an international organisation and it was the case that some Spanish Rotarians were also masons but, of course, Rotary itself is not a secret organisation although, ironically, after it was outlawed some Spanish Rotarians did put themselves at risk by continuing to meet clandestinely.

Even before Franco came to power, the Catholic church in Spain had condemned the Rotary movement and prohibited priests from membership. In 1928, just eight years after the first club was founded in Madrid, a group of prominent bishops branded Rotary as “a new satanic organisation, close to freemasonry, abominable and evil” [‘una nueva organizacíon, satánica, próxima a la masonería, execrable y perversa’, quoted by Pont Clemente, vide inf.]. The reasons for this hostility were set out by a Jesuit priest, Alonso Bárcena, the following year. He acknowledged that Rotary was not a branch of freemasonry and accepted that it had high ideals, including the Golden Rule – ‘Do as you would be done by’ – that formed the last precept of the Rotary Code of Ethics and came from Jesus himself in the Sermon on the Mount. Nevertheless, this was insufficient because it was a purely secular Code that made no reference to God or the Church. This sort of liberalism had been considered heretical by the Catholic Church in Spain since the time of the Inquisition and, however strong Franco’s personal religious conviction may or may not have been, he knew that by portraying himself as the defender of Christianity and creating a state in which every aspect of life and education was imbued by Catholicism his grip on power was strengthened immeasurably. Rotary had no place in Franco’s Spain and the Church provided him with a justification for that.

The subtitle of the book with which I began this talk is ‘Learning from the Past for a Better Future’. For many years German Rotarians preferred to ignore the Nazi era, even to the extent of falsifying some images by cutting out the swastika or replacing it with the Rotary wheel. An earlier attempt by a prominent German Rotarian, Friedrich von Wilpert in 1962, to investigate and confront the movement’s Nazi past had to wait another twenty years before it was published. The current project, by contrast, is both rigorous and transparent. But what are the lessons for today?

I presume we would all like to think that we would have spoken out against Nazi barbarity and stood up for Jewish fellow Rotarians rather than condone their exclusion. But would we? Or would the same combination of pragmatic compromise, self-interest and fear of reprisals have caused us to keep quiet until it was all too late? Significantly, there was no word of condemnation from Rotary International, which seemed more interested in keeping Clubs in Germany than supporting their Jewish members.

As recounted in Paul Harris’s 1935 book, *This Rotarian Age*, the very first Club, in Chicago in 1905, banned political and religious discussion at its meetings since this might have jeopardised fellowship by setting members at odds with one another. Perhaps the several Rotary Presidents who visited Germany in the years immediately before war broke out felt that their silence regarding what was happening there was justified by the movement’s apolitical stance. The problem is, however, that silence in the face of extremism is itself a political stance and was an ignoble one in Nazi Germany.

In the Spanish case, as I have pointed out, the hostility towards Rotary was as much a matter of religion as of politics. Paul Harris’s conviction that Protestant, Catholic and Jew - and, by implication, Moslem, Hindu and so forth - should be able, in his words, “to mingle in happy accord”, may be axiomatic to many of us but for someone who believes that theirs is the one true religion such ecumenism is logically impossible.

So my talk ends on a challenging note. Rotary could, once again, encounter a situation where political neutrality is indefensible or where religious tolerance is not a self-evident truth.

Frank Quinault, RC St Andrews

Acknowledgements

My debt to the project *Rotary und Nationalsozialismus* will be obvious. For the second part of the talk I was glad to draw upon:

Notas para un estudio del rotarismo en España (1920-1936): article by Julio Ponce Alberca, Universidad de Sevilla.

La política anti-rotaria del franquismo: talk to RC Barcelona Mar by Dr. Joan-Francesc Pont Clemente, Universidad de Barcelona.