

READING

Do You Take the Oath?

Soldiers were not the only ones required to take the new oath that pledged allegiance to Hitler. One German recalled the day he was asked to pledge loyalty to the regime:

I was employed in a defense plant (a war plant, of course, but they were always called defense plants). That was the year of the National Defense Law, the law of “total conscription.” Under the law I was required to take the oath of fidelity. I said I would not; I opposed it in conscience. I was given twenty-four hours to “think it over.” In those twenty-four hours I lost the world. . . .

You see, refusal would have meant the loss of my job, of course, not prison or anything like that. (Later on, the penalty was worse, but this was only 1935.) But losing my job would have meant that I could not get another. Wherever I went I should be asked why I left the job I had, and when I said why, I should certainly have been refused employment. Nobody would hire a “Bolshevik.” Of course, I was not a Bolshevik, but you understand what I mean.

I tried not to think of myself or my family. We might have got out of the country in any case, and I could have got a job in industry or education somewhere else.

What I tried to think of was the people to whom I might be of some help later on, if things got worse (as I believed they would). I had a wide friendship in scientific and academic circles, including many Jews, and “Aryans,” too, who might be in trouble. If I took the oath and held my job, I might be of help, somehow, as things went on. If I refused to take the oath, I would certainly be useless to my friends, even if I remained in the country. I myself would be in their situation.

The next day, after “thinking it over,” I said I would take the oath with the mental reservation, that, by the words with which the oath began, “*Ich schwöre bei Gott,*” “I swear by God,” I understood that no human being and no government had the right to override my conscience. My mental reservations did not interest the official who administered the oath. He said, “Do you take the oath?” and I took it. That day the world was lost, and it was I who lost it.

First of all, there is the problem of the lesser evil. Taking the oath was not so evil as being unable to help my friends later on would have been. But the evil of the oath was certain and immediate, and the helping of my friends was in the future and therefore uncertain. I had to commit a positive evil there and then, in the hope of a possible good later on. The good outweighed the evil; but the good was only a hope, the evil a fact. . . . The hope might *not* have been realized—either for reasons beyond my control or because I became afraid later on or even because I was afraid all the time and was simply fooling myself when I took the oath in the first place.

But that is not the important point. The problem of the lesser evil we all know about; in Germany we took Hindenburg as less evil than Hitler, and in the end, we got them both. But that is not why I say that Americans cannot understand. No, the important point is—how many innocent people were killed by the Nazis, would you say? . . . Shall we say, just to be safe, that three million innocent people were killed all together? . . . And how many innocent lives would you like to say I saved? . . . Perhaps five, or ten, one doesn't know. But shall we say a hundred, or a thousand, just to be safe? . . . And it would be better to have saved all three million, instead of only a hundred, or a thousand? There, then, is my point. If I had refused to take the oath of fidelity, I would have saved all three million. . . .

There I was in 1935, a perfect example of the kind of person who, with all his advantages in birth, in education, and in position, rules (or might easily rule) in any country. If I had refused to take the oath in 1935, it would have meant that thousands and thousands like me, all over Germany, were refusing to take it. Their refusal would have heartened millions. Thus the regime would have been overthrown, or indeed, would never have come to power in the first place. The fact that I was not prepared to resist in 1935 meant that all the thousands, hundreds of thousands, like me in Germany were also unprepared, and each one of these hundreds of thousands was, like me, a man of great influence or of great potential influence. Thus the world was lost. . . .

These hundred lives I saved—or a thousand or ten as you will—what do they represent? A little something out of the whole terrible evil, when, if my faith had been strong enough in 1935, I could have prevented the whole evil. . . . I did not believe that I could “move mountains.” The day I said, “No,” I had faith. In the process of “thinking it over,” in the next twenty-four hours, my faith failed me. So, in the next ten years, I was able to remove only anthills, not mountains.

My education did not help me, and I had a broader and better education than most have had or ever will have. All it did, in the end, was to enable me to rationalize my failure of faith more easily than I might have done if I had been ignorant. And so it was, I think,

among educated men generally, in that time in Germany. Their resistance was no greater than other men's.¹

Not everyone was willing to take the oath and pledge allegiance to Hitler. Among those who refused was Ricarda Huch, a 70-year-old poet and writer. She resigned from the prestigious Prussian Academy of Arts with this letter:

Heidelberg, April 9, 1933

Dear President von Schillings:

Let me first thank you for the warm interest you have taken in having me remain in the Academy. I would very much like you to understand why I cannot follow your wish. That a German's feelings are German, I would consider to be just about self-evident, but the definition of what is German, and what acting in a German manner means—those are things where opinions differ. What the present government prescribes by way of patriotic convictions is not my kind of Germanism. The centralization, the use of compulsion, the brutal methods, the defamation of those who hold different convictions, the boastful self-praise—these are matters which I consider un-German and disastrous. As I consider the divergence between this opinion of mine and that being ordered by the state, I find it impossible to remain in an Academy that is a part of the state. You say that the declaration submitted to me by the Academy would not prevent me from the free expression of my opinions. But “loyal cooperation, in the spirit of the changed historical situation, on matters affecting national and cultural tasks that fall within the jurisdiction of the Academy” requires an agreement with the government's program which in my case does not exist. Besides, I would find no newspaper or magazine that would print an opposition opinion. Thus the right to free expression of opinion would remain quite theoretical. . . .

I hereby resign from the Academy.

S. Ricarda Huch²

¹ From Milton Mayer, *They Thought They Were Free: The Germans 1933–45* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 177–81. Reproduced by permission from University of Chicago Press.

² Ricarda Huch, “‘Not My Kind of Germanism’: A Resignation from the Academy,” in *The Nazi Years: A Documentary History*, ed. Joachim Remak (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1969), 162.

The Nazis would not allow Huch to publish her letter. Few knew that it existed until after the war. So she and other dissenters lived in Germany throughout the Nazi era as silent dissenters in “internal exile.”

Connection Questions

1. What were the factors that the defense plant worker considered when deciding whether or not to take the oath?
2. What do you think the defense plant worker meant by the words, "That day the world was lost, and it was I who lost it"? Find evidence in his narrative to explain why he feels "the world was lost" and "it was I who lost it."
3. What does the term "lesser evil" mean? What did this man think about the advantages and the costs of choosing the "lesser evil" in his situation?
4. Is it an understandable choice, as this man argues, to "commit a positive evil there and then, in the hope of a possible good later on"? When do we today face similar dilemmas in our own lives?
5. Why did Ricarda Huch refuse to take the oath? How is Huch's definition of what it means to be German different from the Nazis' definition?
6. What does it mean to go into exile? How is it different from "internal exile"? Can dissent be silent?