

Franz Wohlfahrt, Jehovah's Witness Standing Firm in Faith

Franz Wohlfahrt was born on January 18, 1920, in Velden, Austria, to Gregor and Barbara Wohlfahrt. He had two sisters, Eda, and Anna, and three brothers, Gregor, Christian, and Willibald. His father owned a farm in addition to working on various road-construction projects. The family was originally Catholic, and Franz went to a Catholic school. In the late 1920s, his father, Gregor, began studying the Bible with Jehovah's Witnesses. Franz would occasionally study the Bible with his father and also accompany him when he traveled door to door. After Franz completed school, he became an apprentice to a painter.

In 1938, after the Nazis annexed Austria, it became more dangerous to be a Jehovah's Witness. When Franz refused to salute Hitler or join the Hitler Youth, the Nazis threatened to deport him to Dachau. The master painter to whom he was apprenticed, a Nazi sympathizer, used his connections with the Nazi Party to save Franz from deportation. In August 1939, despite the risk of doing so, Franz was baptized as a Jehovah's Witness. Soon, his father was charged as an enemy of the state because of his religious beliefs. The elder Wohlfahrt went to court in Berlin and was ordered to renounce his faith or face a death sentence. He refused and in December, he was beheaded, along with two dozen others.

In March 1940, Franz was ordered to report to a work camp. He was sent to Diedersdorf on the Hungarian border, where he soon discovered that the "work" was really military training. Young men were required to do drills with spades rather than rifles, sing about Germany, and wear the swastika on their work uniforms. Because of his beliefs as a Jehovah's Witness, Franz refused, so he was put in a dungeon with little food or water for weeks. He finally went before a court and maintained that he would not renounce his faith or support the Nazi Party, so the judge sentenced him to five years of hard labor. He was first transferred to Graz-Karlau, a prison for violent criminals, where he was again placed in a dark dungeon for a time. He was later put into a single cell and forbidden to speak to anyone.

In February 1941, Franz was transferred to Rodgau-Dieburg in Germany. There, he was forced to drain swamps and dig trenches, and in the process, his feet became severely infected with gangrene. Later, he garnered favor with the camp commander, and was able to work as a painter for him, receiving some extra food and a respite from the arduous outdoor labor in return.

In March 1945, Franz was liberated by the U.S. Army under the command of General George S. Patton. He returned home a few months later and was reunited with his mother and fiancée, Maria Stossier. The couple was married in October 1945. They had three daughters, Johanna, Willima, and Hidi, and one son, Gregor. In 1951, the family immigrated to Toronto, where Franz worked as a painter. At the time of Franz's interview in 1997, he and his wife had six grandchildren: Ronald, Julien, Adrian, Joshua, Gregor, and Curina.