

Commemoration and Liberation Ceremonies 2023 “Civil Courage”

The use of the term civil courage dates back to 1848. The factors that lead to acts of civil courage always remain the same. However, the framework of conditions within which they take place in change over time. A special situation with regard to the scope for acts of civil courage can be found in authoritarian and highly repressive contexts. For example, during the National Socialist era, acts of civil courage, which very quickly crossed the narrow boundaries of the system, became acts of resistance against the regime.

People who resisted or rescued others, who initiated courageous individual actions against authorities or officials, and who led resistance activities in factories or in armament production, were mostly reported after the collapse of the system. But even then, the public recognition of acts of civil courage came late, often years or decades later, if at all. The courageous actions of a few people at a time when the majority lived in an adapted way or “tagged along” often triggered feelings of guilt or shame later on, which not infrequently even led to doubts or defenses of these actions. From today's perspective, the term civil courage seems hardly suitable for the behaviour of people who helped other people during the National Socialist era, who took action against the National Socialists, or who joined the resistance. For all those who, as a result of their actions, fell into the repressive machine of the National Socialists were accused, persecuted, degraded, punished and all too often had to pay with their lives.

Such conditions are among the most extreme for demonstrating civil courage. The regime pursued acts that were classified as resistant or “criminal” with brutal severity and arbitrariness. The population lived in an atmosphere of total surveillance and legal uncertainty, which made the need for self-protection and the fear of repression understandable and justified. In the 1970s, psychologist Revital Ludewig-Kedmi turned to the results of the study by American political scientist Manfred Wolfson from the 1960s: Her investigation revealed that the majority of the rescuers were “ordinary” people who had neither special financial resources nor large homes, no better education or important contacts. An important insight, two-thirds of the helpers were women.¹

One example for helpers were the Langthaler family from Upper Austria's Mühlviertel. Anna Hackl, the daughter of Maria Langthaler, and her family hid two escaped Soviet concentration camp prisoners – risking their own lives.

“I thought, if anyone comes to me, I will not let them be shot, I will help them and hide them, I have five boys in the war and I also want all five to come back. And they also have families and mothers.”² Maria Langthaler

The “Mühlviertel manhunt” was a horrific hunt for around 500 escaped Soviet prisoners from the Mauthausen concentration camp towards the end of the Second World War. In this war crime, the civilian population was also called upon to take part in the hunt for escaped “Serious Offenders”, as

¹ Verbotene Hilfe. Deutsche Retterinnen und Retter während des Holocaust (*Forbidden Help. German rescuers during the Holocaust*). Beate Kosmala, Revital Ludewig-Kedmi, Zurich, 2003

² Gugglberger, 2008, p. 64

they were called by the SS. Many people responded to the call of the SS; terrible atrocities were committed. Few tried to help the escaped prisoners by, for example by putting potatoes outside the door or hanging clothes for them outside. The Langthaler family, however, showed outstanding civil courage and saved the lives of two escaped prisoners.

Helpers were not born or raised as such, they were not necessarily better people. In many cases, a specific situation triggered their civil courage, and they went above and beyond with inventiveness and perseverance. Many of them were religiously or politically motivated.

Legal philosopher Arthur Kaufmann aptly compared the relationship between civil courage, non-violent political actions, civil disobedience, protest and resistance (where the boundaries are sometimes fluid, especially in the political sphere) was by the with the “small-coin right of resistance”.

“One should not underestimate the importance of such small resistance. This small resistance has to be put up constantly, so that great resistance is not required again one day. This great resistance demands great sacrifices, it may cost one's life. The small resistance, that is, the resistance that is possible and necessary in democracy, costs courage and civil courage.”³

Civil courage is a more visible resistance out of conviction. Acts of civil courage are about the everyday freedom of expression, about accepting contradiction, about commitment against the discrimination of people who stand up for law and justice, and about respect for human dignity. Orientation towards humanitarian and democratic values as well as personal courage are important components of acts of civil courage.

Today we are not only increasingly becoming victims, but also witnesses of racism, verbal threats of violence and death, bullying, exclusion and discrimination. We are also increasingly confronted with this problem on online platforms. Cyberbullying, online hate, conspiracy theories and fake news have been on the rise for many years.

Racism, discrimination and violence cannot be eliminated overnight. However, a lot can be achieved in small steps. That is, when people look, when the uninvolved intervene to help and when victims do not remain powerless.

More information about civil courage and examples of civil courage today can be found in the brochure "Zivil.Courage.Wirkt", which is available download free of charge at www.zivilcourage.at, and can be found on www.zivilcourageonline.at and the associated free App.

³ Gerd Meyer, Ulrich Dovermann, Siegfried Frech, Günther Gugel (eds.), Zivilcourage lernen. Analysen – Modelle – Arbeitshilfen (*Learning civil courage. Analyses - models - working aids*), Baden-Württemberg, 2004, p. 40