



Wisconsin Alumnus Article, 1947.

[s.l.]: [s.n.], 1947-12

<https://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/B5T50MJV7KABY8N>

<http://rightsstatements.org/vocab/InC/1.0/>

The libraries provide public access to a wide range of material, including online exhibits, digitized collections, archival finding aids, our catalog, online articles, and a growing range of materials in many media.

When possible, we provide rights information in catalog records, finding aids, and other metadata that accompanies collections or items. However, it is always the user's obligation to evaluate copyright and rights issues in light of their own use.

"Don't Write—Never Forget Me"

★ Out of the war comes this delayed story of a Wisconsin alumna who incurred the personal enmity of Adolf Hitler and for her courage suffered the penalty of death at the guillotine. On the opposite page is reproduced the front page of the *Observer*, weekly newspaper of the US Office of Military Government for Germany in Berlin, issue of Sept. 27, 1946—the first release of the story of Arvid and Mildred Harnack.

WIFE OF AN underground leader in Nazi Germany, the only American-born woman to be executed by the Gestapo, now a patron saint of resurgent German liberalism—that is the story of an alumna of the University of Wisconsin.

As far as the Milwaukee family of Mildred Fish Harnack, '25, is concerned, the words in the headline, scrawled on a card, were her last ones. Shortly after their receipt in August 1942, the report of her arrest filtered out of Germany—in code. She was beheaded on the Brandenburg guillotine on Feb. 16, 1943, at 6 p.m. It was Hitler's personal reprisal for her anti-Nazi activities as a member of the Harnack-Schulze-Boysen organization.

More than 10,000 Berliners gathered in the Lustgarten on Sept. 22, 1946, to pay tribute in an impressive ceremony to the more than 15 million men and women who died on the "guillotine front". A block-long banner on the Neue Museum bore the motto: "To Honor the Dead—and to Remind the Living". As the only American woman to be executed by the Gestapo, Mildred Harnack received special honor and the story of her work and death was published on the front page of the AMG newspaper that week.

Those who remember Mildred Fish on campus recall a more or less typical co-ed, slim and blonde and sparkling with life and health. The prison chaplain who last saw her alive reported that at the age of 40 she looked 20 years older. Her hair had turned ashen white; she was unable to walk.

She joined the English faculty at the UW shortly after graduation, and it was here that she met Arvid Harnack, '28, a German student attending the University on a Rockefeller Fellowship in economics. On Christmas Eve, 1942, he was hanged on a foot-long rope, a refined method of Nazi torture to prolong the victim's agony.

Theirs was a campus romance. They were married and left for Germany in 1930. From the day of their arrest in September 1942, the Harnacks were separated. Arvid knew then that the assassination attempt on Hitler was in the offing, and he stalled trial proceedings in the hope that all accused would see that day. He was relieved when he heard that his wife had been given only a six months' sentence at hard labor. He died thinking she would survive to see a free Germany.

When they first returned to Germany, Arvid entered the Ministry of Economics and kept the job after Hitler came to power, the better to carry on his underground work. They last visited Mildred's American family in 1937, at which time they were urged to emigrate from Germany. But the Harnacks replied that "some of us have to stay to work from the inside". They returned to the country of terror.

The American visit had its bleak aspects. They dared not tell of their work. They dared not discuss political ideologies at all. Consequently, they were scorned by many acquaintances who interpreted their silence as pro-Nazi loyalty. It was five years before word of their trial, imprisonment and death redeemed their honor.

"Red Orchestra" was the name of the militant group directed by Arvid Harnack on the underground front. The secret radio transmitters of the organization were referred to by a code of musical instruments, hence the cover name. It had over 600 members, one in the wire room of Hitler's headquarters and one on the top staff of the Luftwaffe. Forty-seven were executed after a trial of four months in Berlin, during which two committed suicide.

In the organization's work, Mildred Harnack was much more than simply the leader's wife. For her husband she typed and distributed leaflets, kept contact with other members and arranged secret meetings. She repeatedly used her position as literary advisor to a Berlin book publishing firm (she translated *Lust for Life* and *Drums Along the Mohawk*) to travel and maintain liaison with the various branches of the nationwide movement. So secret were the details that members often did not know the others were anti-Nazi until they met in prison. And even there, spies were often placed among the accused.

Another angle of the story was recently uncovered by investigators for the American Military Government. Several weeks after the trial, Hitler idly thumbed through the court records, came across Mildred's dossier and immediately ordered her trial reopened. As the only American then in his power, she became the target for his hatred of this country. On Mildred Harnack, Adolf Hitler focused his loathing for democracy, and the wrath of the Nazis descended. In double-quick time, Manfred Roeder, the Nazi chief judge who had decreed the original sentence, changed it to the death penalty.

With comprehensive knowledge of the German underground movement, Mildred Harnack stood up courageously under Gestapo tortures and revealed nothing. The bodies of most Gestapo victims were shipped to laboratories en masse for experimental purposes. But the headless torso of Mildred Harnack was recognized by a personal friend, Hermann Striever, director of the Anatomy School at Charity Hospital. He spirited it away and had it secretly cremated. The urn with her ashes is now at the home of her sister-in-law in Berlin.

The terse, cold sentences of military report give only this bare outline in the story of a living sacrifice to freedom; a dedication of life that sprang from the University of Wisconsin campus.



OBSERVER

ISSUE 62

WEEKLY NEWSPAPER, OFFICE OF MILITARY GOVERNMENT FOR GERMANY (U. S.) + BERLIN, SEPTEMBER 27, 1946



"and to Remind the Living"

By Gus Mathieu
Guest Writer

Last Sunday more than ten thousand Berliners gathered in the Lustgarten to pay tribute in an impressive ceremony to the 15 million men and women who have died in Nazi concentration camps and on the "guillotine front".

After a short opening address by Berlin's mayor, Dr. Werner, in which he expressed the hope that this day would become a permanent memorial day in Europe, hundreds of flower wreaths were placed besides a huge eternal flame burning under a replica of the concentration camp survivors' symbol — a red triangle surmounted by the golden letters KZ — for *Konzentrations Lager*.

Among the audience were many former inmates of the camps and relatives of victims who had died in them. They listened with reverence to Beethoven's "Eroica" played for the dead of the 22 nations whose flags, including Republican Spain, decorated the Lustgarten. A banner on the Neue Museum bore the motto: "To Honor the Dead — and to Remind the Living".

City Counsellor Ottomar Geschke, who was a political prisoner for many years, and members of the seven foremost resistance groups in Berlin gave gripping accounts of the courageous deeds of their groups. The resistance groups are: the Seafkow, European-Union, 20th of July, Uhrig and Romer, Heinz Kapelle, Christian Resistance and Schulze-Boysen-Harnack Groups.

Mildred Harnack Only American Woman Executed by Gestapo

Among the dead of the resistance groups which were honored Sunday, was a woman from Milwaukee, Wis., Mildred Harnack, the only American-born woman executed by the Gestapo.

Mildred Harnack, nee Mildred Fish, was beheaded at six o'clock on the evening of February 16, 1943, at the Gestapo execution grounds at Plötzensee, near Berlin, for having belonged to the militant anti-Nazi group "Red Orchestra" directed by her German-born husband, Arvid Harnack. The clandestine radio transmitters of the organization were referred to by a code of musical instruments, hence the covername "Red Orchestra". In all, 47 members in Berlin were sent to their death after a trial of four months during which two committed suicide. Mildred Harnack's husband was killed on Christmas Eve 1942 by hanging on a foot-long rope, a refined method of cruelty by which the Nazi henchmen prolonged the victim's agony.

Mildred Fish met Arvid Harnack when he was a student at Wisconsin University on a Rockefeller Fellowship in Economics. Arvid Harnack belonged to the honored family of Harnack savants, after which the Harnack House of OMGUS Headquarters is named. When Mildred Fish married Arvid Harnack and left the US for Germany in 1930, she never anticipated that one day she would die for freedom's cause at the hands of her adopted countrymen. When the couple last visited Mildred's relatives in Maryland in 1937, they were advised to emigrate from Germany. But the Harnacks replied that "some of us have to stay to work from the inside" and returned to the country of terror to fight against Hitler from the underground front.



Mildred and Dr. Arvid Harnack, an American and her German husband who were executed by the Gestapo.



The henchman's keys to the guillotine at the Brandenburg jail.