

Series title: Traces of the White Rose

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Episode title: Part Three – Not In Vain

Episode Description

In this episode of Traces of the White Rose, Tom Herring (Artistic Director, SANSARA) and Dr Alexandra Lloyd (St Edmund Hall, University of Oxford & Director of the White Rose Project) explore the final days of the White Rose resisters with poignant excerpts from their last letters, set alongside choral music by Cecilia McDowall, Philip Moore, Ethel Smyth and Piers Connor Kennedy.

Music

Extracts from:

Johannes Brahms - Warum ist das Licht gegeben?

Cecilia McDowall - Standing as I do before God (soloist: [Hilary Cronin](#))

Philip Moore - Three Prayers of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Ethel Smyth - Komm, süßer Tod

Piers Connor Kennedy - Blessed are the peacemakers

Episode Transcript

Traces of the White Rose, Part Three: Not in vain

KURT

Dear Clara! Death parts us just at the moment when we are closest. Think of the wonderful hours, of our being with the children, and forget all suffering! We will remain one heart and one soul. Be proud that you are playing your part in the fight for a new Germany. You are heroes just like the women and children who lost their fathers at the Front.

TOM

Today - we live with the traces of those who dreamed of a brighter future...in times of upheaval and conflict, we search for traces of meaning to hold onto, and stories of courage and resilience to help guide us forward.

In this podcast, we're going to share a story that speaks powerfully to us today - the story of the White Rose resistance: at its heart, five students and a professor who stood up to Nazism, and paid with their lives.

Through newly-translated letters, diary entries and resistance pamphlets, we'll hear traces of their story in their own words...traces that live on to this day.

I'm Tom Herring...

ALEX

and I'm Dr Alex Lloyd...

TOM

and you're listening to Traces of the White Rose, a podcast series telling the story of the White Rose resistance in their own words, with music by my choir SANSARA.

ALEX

and new translations by students at the University of Oxford...

At the end of the last episode, we heard a letter Fritz Hartnagel wrote to Sophie Scholl on the 22nd of February 1943. He described how grateful he was that Sophie's letters had finally reached him, how much comfort and hope they gave him.

FRITZ

Your letters do me so much good. Today another reached me, and the first thing to greet me were some lilac-red petals that fell into my lap. And as I hold your letter in my hands, and as warm rays of sunshine stream in through the window, is not spring already here? Or at least a sense that it is on its way and a fervent hope that it will soon be here...

TOM

This optimism is echoed in a letter Sophie wrote the night before her arrest...

SOPHIE

You can't help rejoicing and laughing, just as it's impossible to have a dispassionate or sad heart when you see the springtime clouds in the sky or branches in bud, swaying, stirred by a breath of wind. Oh, how I long for spring to come again.

TOM

It was a spring she would never see. On Monday 22 February 1943, Sophie was tried for treason alongside her brother Hans and their friend and fellow resistor Christoph. Their trial finished at lunchtime.

ALEX

At 4pm they were informed that they had an hour left to live. At 5pm, Sophie was led to the guillotine. Minutes later, her brother Hans was taken too. His last words were 'Es lebe die Freiheit!' - 'Long Live Freedom!'.

Christoph's life ended that day too. He had been arrested two days earlier as he went to collect a leave permit to allow him to visit his wife and new baby daughter in hospital. Christoph wrote to his wife, Herta, from prison. He signed himself 'Christel', the name his friends and family used for him.

CHRISTOPH

22nd February 1943, Munich

My beloved wife!

Thank God you and our dear children are well. When you think of me, you need not be worried. Following an unfortunate series of events, I have ended up at the Gestapo in Munich. But I am not doing badly here at all. I feel quite calm and await the things that are to come. Never have I drawn so much strength from my love for you as I do now. It feels as though I am very close to you. I see you before me, I feel your love in me and my love in you and I am so happy, because I know that this love is indestructible. Even if you cannot understand why I am being held in this cell, then stay calm, stay calm and do not worry. I am being treated well, and I am not finding life in the cells so bad. And the children? I see them in my mind, one after another, so sweet, carefree, and wonderfully innocent. What darling creatures you have borne me, my darling wife. ... My love for you often rises beyond measure, I am unendingly grateful to you. I want to live for you and the children.

With a warm embrace,

Your Christel.

ALEX

After Hans and Sophie had been apprehended, it did not take long before the other members of the core group were identified. Having learned of their arrest, Alexander Schmorell embarked on a daring escape attempt, leaving Munich and heading towards Austria.

A reward of 1000 Reichsmarks was offered for his capture. This was a vast sum, amounting to about half the average annual salary at the time. Days later, he was arrested. He was interrogated and stood trial on the 19th of April 1943 alongside other suspected resisters, including Professor Kurt Huber and Willi Graf.

Alexander's execution took place three months later. He wrote a final letter to his father and stepmother:

ALEXANDER

13th July 1943, Munich

It seems it was not to be any other way, and in accordance with the will of God I am to leave my earthly life today, to enter another, one which will never end and where we will all meet again. May this reunion be your solace and your hope. Sadly, this will be harder for you than for me, because I pass on in the knowledge that I have remained faithful to my deepest convictions, and the truth. All of this allows me to face the imminent hour of my death with a clear conscience. ... Think of the millions of young people losing their lives out there on the battlefield – my fate is the same as theirs. ...

(With me goes Prof. Huber, who asked me to pass on his warmest greetings to you!)

ALEX

Alexander did not go to his death alone. Another member of the White Rose was scheduled to be executed on the same day: Professor Huber. He had become actively involved in the White Rose from the Winter of 1942. Like Christoph, Huber was a husband and father.

Huber was the last member of the group to be arrested. As he was taken away by the Gestapo, his daughter called after him: 'Don't be home late!'

Huber was interrogated, and then transferred to the prison at Neudeck. He wrote to his wife Clara to let her know how he was faring. His letter is full of practical considerations and love for his children Birgit and Wolfgang, known as Wolfi.

KURT

25th March 1943

Dearest Clara! As of yesterday I am in Neudeck prison and ask you to visit me by yourself as soon as possible. The visiting times are listed above...

Please bring just some old shirts and a night shirt! I'll give the red shirt back to you together with my laundry, and it would help if you could bring along a suitcase for these, since mine will need to stay here. Then I just need my sock suspenders and shoelaces (one pair).

You can write to me every couple of weeks, and I'll do the same. For all your dear letters, which always reassure me, and for everything for which you all have scrimped and saved, I thank you from the bottom of my heart! You are all so brave and I am looking forward very much to seeing you.

Little Birgit should keep on making music – that's the very best antidote to a lot of studying. She is so dear, and Wolfi is such a good little chap too...

Could you bring me volumes one and two of the Leibniz from the red philosophy series? For today, I wish you much love and greetings to everyone! A warm embrace for you and the children from your concerned father.

...And please at some point bring a clothes brush, too!

ALEX

Professor Huber continued to work on his academic research for as long as he could while in prison. He asked Clara to bring him books and papers. He requested a stay of execution to allow him to complete his work, but it was refused. Three months after his arrest, the news came that he was to be executed later that day.

He wrote to his wife, and their two young children.

KURT

13th July 1943

In the middle of my work today, I received the news that I have so long been waiting for.

Dearest, rejoice with me! I may do it for my fatherland, for a just and more beautiful fatherland that will certainly arise out of this war.

Dearest Clara! Your life was a thorny path, but today you are already a saint. Forgive me all the ways in which I have failed you! I love you from the depths of my heart and will be with you and our dear children every day, until you follow after me to the place where no one ever parts again. I place into your devoted and loving hands the fate and education of our dear children. I know that they will think of their father and will give as much joy as they can to their dear mummy.

Dear Clara! Death parts us just at the moment when we are closest. Think of the wonderful hours, of our being with the children, and forget all suffering! We will remain one heart and one soul. Be proud that you are playing your part in the fight for a new Germany. You are heroes just like the women and children who lost their fathers at the Front.

Dearest Birgit, the beginning of your life has been dark and serious, but the future is bright. Yours and mummy's letters have been an endless source of comfort to me. I know you will continue to be your mother's strength and stay. Your father will not forget you; he is praying for you all. God has given you rich gifts. Use them. Take delight in music and poetry and remain the good little angel that you have been to us.

Dearest, brave little Wolfi! A whole beautiful life lies open before you. You will be a good little boy and an accomplished man, mother's protector and pride.

And if life is ever difficult, think of your daddy who never stops caring for his little boy.

Dear ones! Do not weep for me – I am happy and at peace!

And when I ask myself: What have I left behind?

Ideas. Only sketches, piles of paper.

Hardly a fair copy among them. Death

Is the fair copy of my life, and that was not in vain.

ALEX

After Alexander and Professor Huber had been executed, only one member of the core group was left alive: the student Willi Graf.

Willi had been arrested on the same day as Hans and Sophie back in february and was tried alongside Alexander and Professor Huber in april.

He was kept alive in solitary confinement; the authorities had hoped to get further information out of him. After all, he had been instrumental in spreading the pamphlets, and he was connected to many other individuals who had helped the White Rose. But he never betrayed his fellow conspirators.

On the 12th of October 1943, nearly eight months after his arrest, Willi was told that his execution would take place that same day. He wrote to his sister Anneliese in a letter smuggled out of the prison by the Catholic chaplain:

WILLI

Anneliese! On this, my final day, I have received your letter, and your words were a great comfort to me. Now you alone must help our parents bear this suffering and seek to be for them what I could not. You know how much you have meant to me, and in this, my final hour, I want to tell you how much I have loved you. Let the conversations we have had in our final weeks together be a help to you and give meaning for your future life. I will be with you, even when I can no longer stand at your side in this life. ... For us, death is not the end, but the beginning of our true life, and I shall die trusting in God's will and provision.

...

With heartfelt love,

Your Willi

TOM

These last letters are full of hope, faith, and a strong resolve that they had followed their conscience.

ALEX

Willi told his sister that others should now carry on the work of the White

Rose. And indeed they did. Even as Willi was executed, the White Rose continued. They had declared “We will never be silent!”. Their message would live on.

TOM

Thank you for listening to Traces of the White Rose. We’ll be sharing a final discussion episode which will feature some more insights and reflections on the White Rose from some of Alex’s academic colleagues...

ALEX

and we’ll explore some of the traces of the White Rose today, how they are remembered and how their legacy has been used in some fascinating, and sometimes surprising, ways...

END OF EPISODE