



FIG. 24. *Gertrud Luckner 843*. Leather, archival pigment on canvas, fabric, metal, zippers; 54½ x 59 x 2 inches; 2015.

Gertrud Luckner (1900–1995)

Luckner led Freiburg Catholics, with money received from the archbishop, smuggling out Jews over the Swiss border and delivering messages from the beleaguered Jewish Community. After the war, Luckner devoted herself to furthering understanding between Jews and Christians. Born: England During Holocaust: Germany.

GERTRUD LUCKNER

Devoted to Christian-Jewish Reconciliation

Carol Rittner

It seems almost a cliché to call Gertrud Luckner extraordinary, but that is what she was. When most people in Nazi-dominated Germany were turning their backs on their Jewish neighbors and colleagues, Gertrud Luckner was looking for ways to help them. When most ordinary Germans closed their eyes to the fact that Jews were being forced out of Nazi Germany, Gertrud Luckner was looking for ways to connect them with her contacts in England and elsewhere so they might find a place of refuge. When so many ordinary citizens in Nazi Germany refused to extend a helping hand to infirm and elderly Jews who had no one to look after them, Gertrud Luckner conspired with her friend Rabbi Leo Baeck in Berlin to visit them and to bring them food and medicine so they would not feel alone and abandoned. And when the Nazis began to arrest and deport the Jews of Germany to concentration camps in Poland, Gertrud Luckner, a slightly built, intelligent and fearless woman, risked her life to help hide and save Jewish men, women and children.

Who was this woman who refused to be daunted by the Nazis and the Holocaust? Who was this Catholic woman who refused to be infected with the theological anti-Judaism coursing through her religious tradition and the racist anti-Semitism animating her society? And who was this German woman of courage who, after 1945, refused to give in to the physical and psychological after-effects she endured following years of Nazi harassment, torment and imprisonment?

Gertrud Luckner was born to German parents in Liverpool, England on September 26, 1900. They returned to Germany when Gertrud was six years old. Her parents, still quite young, died after World War I. She had no brothers or sisters. She once said, “My family was a small part of my life.”¹

The war, however, was not a small part of her life. It impacted her greatly, and while she missed out on some regular schooling because of the war, she developed an early and abiding interest in social welfare and international solidarity. “I was always against war,” she said, and “so I got involved with a very international group. I received my degree from Frankfurt am Main in 1920, in the political science department.”² Gertrud went on to study economics, with a specialization in social welfare, in Birmingham, England (at a Quaker college for religious and social work). She returned to Germany in 1931, shocked by the popular support Hitler and the Nazis had, “appalled at the Nazi vocabulary of women students



in Freiburg.”³ She obtained her doctorate from the University of Freiburg in 1938, just as Hitler and the Nazis were consolidating their power, stepping up their harassment and persecution of Jews in Germany, and preparing for all-out war in Europe.

A trained social worker, Luckner worked with the German Catholic Caritas organization in Freiburg. She was active in the German resistance to Nazism and was also a member of the banned German Catholic Peace Movement (*Friedensbund deutscher Katholiken*). When it became increasingly difficult for Jews in Germany, she traveled throughout the country, giving assistance to Jewish families wherever and whenever she could.

Even before the Nazis came to power in Germany in 1933 and before World War II and the Holocaust, Gertrud Luckner was ecumenical in mind and spirit. She had been raised as a Quaker, but she became a Catholic after hearing the Italian Catholic priest and politician Father Luigi Sturzo (1871-1959) “in a packed hall at the University of Birmingham in 1927.”⁴ For her, religion was about compassion, reaching out from one person to another, a favorite method of hers “with which she worked magic.”⁵ What mattered to her were human beings and their well-being. Her political views, influenced by

her Quaker upbringing and her Catholic social justice, contributed to her early identification of Hitler’s political and international danger.⁶

After the outbreak of World War II in 1939, Luckner organized a special Office for Religious War Relief (*Kirchliche Kriegshilfsstelle*) within the Caritas organization, with the blessing and active support of Freiburg’s Catholic Archbishop Conrad Gröber. Although the record of the institutional Christian Churches (Catholic and Protestant alike) in Germany during the Nazi era and the Holocaust is less than exemplary, there were individual church people – clergy and laity alike – who tried to help people persecuted by the Nazis. And while Archbishop Gröber was not what one would call an outstanding anti-Nazi resister, neither was he a rabid supporter of Hitler.

As the war wore on, the Office for War Relief became, in effect, the instrument of the Freiburg Catholics for helping racially persecuted “non-Aryans,” both Jewish and Christian. As the driving force behind this relief effort, Gertrud Luckner used monies she received from the archbishop to smuggle Jews over the Swiss border to safety and to pass messages from the beleaguered German-Jewish community to the outside world.

Luckner often worked with Rabbi Leo Baeck,

the leader of the Reich Union of Jews in Germany (*Reichsvereinigung der Juden in Deutschland*), to help the Jews. She remained in close contact with him until his arrest and deportation to Theresienstadt in early 1943. Then, on November 5, 1943, as she was on her way by train to Berlin to transfer 5,000 marks to the last remaining Jews in that city, Luckner was arrested by the Gestapo. For nine weeks, she was mercilessly interrogated by the Gestapo, but she revealed nothing. She was then sent to Ravensbrück concentration camp for 19 harrowing months until she and thousands of other women were liberated by the Soviet army on May 3, 1945.

Asked why she did what she did, risking her life to help Jews and others who were in danger during the Nazi era and the Holocaust, almost astonished, she always replied that it “was obvious.” What did she mean? Asked if it was “religious conviction” that prompted her to do what she did, she responded with one word: “Probably.”⁷

After the war, Gertrud Luckner established a center for Catholic-Jewish reconciliation in Freiburg, although the mood in the country in the 1950s did not support such work, nor did the Vatican. However:

Having risked her life for Jews and spent the last two years of the war in Ravensbrück concentration camp, Luckner found it impossible to abandon the remnant of Jewish humanity that survived the Holocaust. Already 45 years old at the war’s end and in poor physical condition, the irrepressible Luckner decided to dedicate

herself anew to fighting German antisemitism and promoting Christian-Jewish reconciliation. Luckner knew such reconciliation would be a long-term process, simply because it meant confronting German and Christian antisemitism.⁸

Luckner established the Freiburg Circle, a German dialogue group devoted to conciliatory work with Jews, as well as a journal, the *Freiburger Roundbrief*, which, because of Luckner’s personal credibility, attracted Jewish readers and correspondents of international reputation. Her friend Rabbi Leo Baeck, who survived the war and the Holocaust, never forgot that Gertrud Luckner was risking her life for Jews when she was arrested by the Gestapo. At his invitation, she visited Israel in 1951, one of the first Germans to do so. It was the first of several visits to Israel, where there is now a home for the aged named in her honor.

Dr. Gertrud Luckner devoted herself to the work of Christian-Jewish reconciliation after the war. In no small part, it was her persevering work as a Catholic that helped nudge the Church to begin to come to terms with its long and shameful history of theological anti-Judaism. While there were others – clergy and lay, women and men – who also helped the Catholic Church rethink its religious and practical relationship with living Jews and Judaism, few were more dedicated to this task than Gertrud Luckner. On February 15, 1966, Yad Vashem recognized Gertrud Luckner as Righteous Among the Nations.⁹ ■

