

[German PR Agency, May 1995 on Reinhard von Kirchbach]
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World War II-Germany/

Luftwaffe commander to pastor to fighter for religious toleration

By Leon Mangasarian

Altenhof, Germany (dpa) - Fifty years after Nazi Germany's capitulation, a highly decorated former World War II air force commander is leading an ambitious project aimed at promoting greater tolerance among the major world religions which draws its inspiration from Saxony's royal family.

Reinhard von Kirchbach, 81, served in the Luftwaffe, or air force, as commander of JU-88 bombers on Germany's eastern front during World War II and flew over 200 missions deep into territory of the former Soviet Union.

A theology student in the 1930s, Kirchbach joined the German Armed Forces in 1939 after Adolf Hitler launched his invasion of Poland, which started World War II, despite the fact that his pastor father had been dismissed and jailed by the Nazis.

"I was strongly influenced by the terrible terms which the Versailles Treaty imposed on Germany after World War I," said Kirchbach in an interview at his home in a pastoral converted milk house, surrounded by oak trees, near the Baltic port city of Kiel.

"In school we always learned that Germany could not allow this treaty to stand, so it seemed natural to volunteer when the war began," he said.

Kirchbach was swiftly promoted to bomber commander based at an East Prussian airbase from which the Luftwaffe was carrying out attacks on the former Soviet Union.

His aircraft was repeatedly hit during raids, once returning to base on a sputtering last engine, another time receiving an anti-aircraft salvo which nearly tore off one of the plane's wings.

"The lesson of the war is that we must not make heroic sto-

ries out of this - I refuse any soldierly pathos," said Kirchbach softly.

By 1943 the war had turned against Germany and most of Kirchbach's original Luftwaffe comrades had been shot down.

"I was told we could not afford to lose all the older commanders, promoted to first lieutenant and banned from further combat missions," he said.

Kirchbach was by this time highly decorated for his bravery and had received the Iron Cross First Class, the Front Line Aviation'Bar in Gold and other medals.

Asked whether he had any knowledge about the Nazi death camps which were entering their peak period of mass murder at this time, Kirchbach says he had known there were many concentration camps but that fact that his father had been held in a camp and then released had lulled him into a false view of overall conditions for such prisoners.

"My father was arrested with other church members who refused to conform to Nazi policy in 1935," Kirchbach said, adding "But Papa was released shortly thereafter and this led me to discount rumours I heard about the camps."

"This issue remains deeply painful to me up to today," he said closing his eyes.

Historians say that Opposition church leaders were one of the few groups to emerge from the Third Reich relatively unscathed: Of the 900 church leaders arrested by the Nazis during the war a total of 12 were executed.

Kirchbach ended World War II as the commander of a 250-man paratrooper Company which he surrendered to American forces on May 8, 1945 near Salzburg, Austria.

After spending three months in a prisoner of war camp he was released and shortly thereafter returned to university to complete his theology studies in Luebeck. He volunteered as a chaplain in PoW [Prisoners of War] camps where Germans were being held and served in both England and Egypt before getting his first permanent posting as a pastor in 1949.

From 1966 to 1976 Kirchbach was Dean of the gothic, brick

cathedral in the maritime town of Schleswig.

But Kirchbach says he was increasingly captivated by the idea of inter-religious toleration and took early retirement in 1976 - with the support of the Protestant church - to begin working on a project which he hoped could serve as simple model for religious coexistence in a world increasingly torn by religious differences.

"The initial Inspiration came from my stepmother whose father served as a teacher for Saxony's Wettiner royal family in Dresden," Kirchbach said.

Saxony's King August the Strong converted to Catholicism in order to boost his claim to Catholic Poland which Protestant Saxony basically annexed in 1697. August the Strong soon lost control of Poland but the Wettiner remained Catholic amid their largely protestant subjects.

"Saxony's royal family was Catholic but they insisted on having their children brought up by Protestants. This was where I got my first ideas not just about religious toleration but about different religions actually living together," Kirchbach said.

By 1980 he had gathered a core group of 10 Christians, Moslems, Hindus, and Buddhists and began what has become an annual one-month retreat which has met in Germany, India, Indonesia, Israel, Japan, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.

Members of the different faiths live, cook and clean together with most time being spent in discussion of their differing religious beliefs.

Members of each faith are given a block of time during the retreat to present aspects of their religious doctrine. For example, during one evening at last year's retreat held near Kirchbach's home Moslem, Christian and Buddhist members engaged in a debate about the nature of the devil followed by a general lecture on Buddhism to an audience of some 50 invited guests.

Kirchbach says that inviting local religious communities to attend retreat sessions - and witness the different faiths living together - is one of the key ways he hopes

spread the message of religious toleration and coexistence.

"We are not involved in any mixing of the faiths," Kirchbach stresses. 'Together But Not Mixed' was the motto of last year's gathering.

He said that if anything, most members of the retreat deepen their belief in their own faith, while developing close ties to people with other religions.

"I now have a closer friendship with a Moslem religious leader than I ever had with a Protestant pastor," Kirchbach said.

Half a Century after World War II the conflict in former Yugoslavia has intensified Kirchbach's belief in attempting to live out religious toleration as a counter-example to the bloodshed - but he remains deeply concerned that Yugoslavia is only a foretaste of potential further religious and ethnic conflict.

"Some people may regard me as a hopeless Optimist," said Kirchbach with a sigh.

"But this project is like an apple tree - it has to be planted, tended and protected for many years before it can hope to bear fruit."

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