Campaigning for Cologne's Maligned Resistance

They wore their hair long, sang songs by banned Jewish composers and fought the Nazi regime. But history remembered Cologne’s Edelweiss Pirates as criminals rather than resistance fighters...until now.

Jean Jülich (right) and his fellow Edelweiss Pirates

Sixty years later they are still officially listed as petty thieves and criminals. Their acts of resistance -- while having been recognized by the state of Israel -- have not yet been officially acknowledged here in Germany. That’s about to change with a new initiative by the District President of Cologne Jürgen Peters who wants to rehabilitate the Edelweiss Pirates. Jean Jülich, a surviving member of the group, has published his memoirs and is supporting an upcoming film about the Pirates.

Father's internment a pivotal moment

Born in 1929, in the working class Cologne suburb of Sülz, Jean was just seven years old when his father, a member of the communist party, was arrested by the Gestapo. "In 1936, sometime in the morning they turned up in grandma’s apartment - my father was in the toilet, he’d hidden himself there - they pulled him out and bashed him up and down the corridor, he was bleeding from his mouth and nose, his face was swollen - it was really horrible. Then they took him away." Jean’s father was sentenced to 10 years with hard labor for belonging to the communist party. His grandmother and aunt were also imprisoned for six months and Jean was placed in an orphanage until they were released.

The experience led Jean to distrust the Nazi’s and the Hitler Youth, which he rejected in favor of the free living, romantic youth group called the Edelweiss Pirates. Besides, he said, the daily drills of the Hitler Youth were too boring. "Then I was put into a Nazi Reichsbahn training center in Nippes - it consisted of a factory, school, Hitler Youth – all in one, and in the morning you reported in - Heil Hitler, if you wanted to go to the loo it was Heil Hitler, Heil Hitler reporting back, the whole day long your hand went up and down, and I really hated that."
Hiking Songs and anti-Nazi leaflets

Towards the end of World War Two, there were about 3000 Edelweiss Pirates in Cologne and several hundred more in neighboring cities. They developed out of a youth hiking movement called the "Bündische Jugend" which was neither aligned to a political party nor a church but there was no organized structure and several loose groupings of Edelweiss Pirates existed in each suburb of Cologne.

With the rise of the Nazi's in the thirties, these young people refused to join the Hitler Youth. They were like any other teenagers rebelling against the authorities. However this was a totalitarian state and rebelling could cost you your life. Dr Wenge, a historian at the Nazi documentation center in Cologne, says the Edelweiss Pirates established their own subculture in the Rhine-Ruhr region by wearing a certain style of clothing, singing their own romantic ballads and later anti-nazi ditties. Unlike the Nazi youth organizations, girls and boys interacted together and traveled for weekend hiking trips to nearby Konigsforst. "For this reason they were persecuted by the Hitler Youth, the police, the Gestapo and even the Nazi judiciary and branded as criminals, sexual deviants and as threat to the state," says Dr Wenge.

Opposition gathered pace as war raged

As the allied bombing of Cologne intensified, the city, as well as public order crumbled, and the childish pranks and fisticuffs with the Hitler youth grew more serious. Jean Jülich and his band of friends took to throwing bricks through munitions factories and pouring sugar water into the petrol tanks of cars belonging to Nazis. Other groups derailed train carriages loaded with munitions or distributed leaflets critical of the regime. In 1944, Jean along with several of his friends were arrested for allegedly being involved with a man called Hans Steinbruck or Bomber Hans who was reportedly plotting to bomb the Gestapo headquarters in Cologne. Jean was fifteen years old and spent four months in a tiny cell at the Brauweiler prison on the outskirts of Cologne. He and the other prisoners were interrogated and tortured by the Gestapo. And then one day, Jean said some of his friends, including Bartholomaeus Schink were taken away. In all, 13 people were hanged early in the morning on the tenth of November 1944. Among the six executed was the youngest, 16 year old Pirate Schink. The street is now named after him but he and the others executed that day are still officially listed as criminals.

Dr Nicola Wenge believes the Edelweiss Pirates should be rehabilitated as victims of the Nazi regime, but she is cautious not to apply the term 'resistance fighters'. "I think one has to differentiate the term
‘resistance’. But primarily I would describe it as resistant or opposition conduct.” However she adds that actions such as distributing leaflets, or chalking slogans on the walls like "down with the dictatorship" or pulling down Nazi flags required considerable courage and could be regarded as a form of youth resistance. However, the label of criminals in Cologne remain.

Even the state of Israel has recognized that some form of opposition existed in wartime Cologne. In 1984, the Israeli Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority, Yad Vashem, awarded Jean Jülich, and Bartholomaeus Schink, with its highest accolade for their actions. Jean said receiving the medal and travelling to Jerusalem to plant a tree in the Yad Vashem garden was wonderful and positive experience for his entire family. Now the case has been reopened and the new District Governor of Cologne Jürgen Roters wants to fully rehabilitate the group. He says he wants to lift the stigma of crime that still surrounds this youth movement.

Both boys and girls were in the Cologne resistance.

After the war, Jean Jülich received a certificate acknowledging the four months he had spent in jail and recognizing that the had been politically persecuted. And although Jean Jülich has never called himself a resistance fighter, he says it’s important that the memories of his friends are finally restored.

"And I have faith, okay I’ve always had faith, but in this case, I really believe that my dead friends will at least be rehabilitated and will no longer be portrayed as criminals. I don’t have any problems because I’ve got my certificate. But this case needs to be processed by the District Governor Roters and that can’t happen overnight. It’s taken 60 years, and six more months won’t make much difference."

http://www.dw.de/campaigning-for-colognes-maligned-resistance/a-1391096
http://www.raoulwallenberg.net/saviors/others/edelweiss-pirates-story/