

Hauke Friederichs

# The Sign of the Flame

## Stalingrad, the White Rose and foredoomed love

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Sample Translation by Sarah Rimmington

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*Sophie Scholl and Fritz Hartnagel say goodbye in Munich in May 1942. He is leaving for the Eastern Front; she is starting university and soon joins the famous White Rose resistance group. At the same time as worrying about her boyfriend, who, along with thousands and thousands of his comrades, is trapped in Stalingrad, she organises the fight against the Hitler regime.*

CHAPTER 1  
Near and Far

*May 1942*

They're travelling towards each other, sitting in their trains and longing to be together again. He is a lieutenant in the Luftwaffe, and she is a student just starting her first semester. Their plan is to meet at Tübingen station on 2 May 1942, a Saturday. The pair last saw each other six weeks ago; a long time in these uncertain days. The Second World War has been underway for nearly three years. It overshadows the relationship between Sophie Scholl, who is 20, and the 25-year-old Friedrich Hartnagel, known to everyone as Fritz. During this weekend together in south-western Germany, they just want to forget all their cares.

Hartnagel, who commands a signals unit in Le Mans, France, is undertaking an arduous journey to reach the rendezvous, travelling a good 900 kilometres through occupied France, around Paris and through the Vosges. After many hours, he will finally cross the Rhine, then head past the Black Forest towards the Neckar River.

His girlfriend is traveling from Munich to Tübingen, whose medieval castle and half-timbered buildings rise above the Neckar. Her older brother, Hans Scholl, was assigned to a military hospital here for a few months as a soldier. Like almost all the young men Sophie Scholl knows, her two brothers and her boyfriend have had to join the Wehrmacht. Her father, at least, is too old to be conscripted. Robert Scholl did not want to fight on the front in 1914. He opposed the First World War, resisted the euphoria and did not enlist voluntarily, joining the medical corps instead. Her father's courage, and his strength in defying the spirit of the times, have had a formative influence on his youngest daughter. She, too, abhors the war, and longs for an end to the fighting, and an end to dictatorship.

Sophie Scholl has been thinking about resistance for a long time. She's already talked with her brother Hans about what action an individual or a small group of friends could take against the tyrannical National Socialist regime. In contrast to the many who suffer

in silence, who sidestep the issue or even go along with regime, she no longer wants to watch silently on; she wants to do something. Her boyfriend, Fritz Hartnagel, admires her resolve. He is fighting in a conflict he is opposed to, serving a system he abhors. They write hundreds of letters, encouraging each other to hold on to their humanity in an increasingly inhuman environment.

The story of Sophie Scholl and Fritz Hartnagel demonstrates how it is possible to preserve freedom of thought within a system of state-sanctioned terror – and how radical those who challenged National Socialism had to be. It plays out at a time when many soldiers on both sides were dying on the Russian Front, when death squads were slaying hundreds of thousands of Jews, Sinti and Roma, when the Gestapo was hounding anyone who opposed the war, and when tyranny had robbed people of almost all their freedom. It is a story of great yearning, a complicated love, friends who gave everything for each other, and unflinching courage.

Sophie Scholl is familiar with the places she passes through on her way from Munich to Tübingen. From her compartment window, she sees the heathland of the Haspelmoor, outside Augsburg, and then the train rolls through the “baroque corner” of Swabia with its many ornate churches, including the Church of Our Lady of the Assumption in Jettingen. Her journey then takes her through the alluvial forests of the Donauried wetlands and along the Danube itself. In Ulm, her home town, she has no time to stop off and see her parents and her oldest sister Inge, who live on Münsterplatz. She said goodbye to her family only a few days earlier, when she left to begin her studies in Munich. Arriving there, she was surprised to be greeted by a message from her boyfriend, saying they could meet at the weekend. It’s great news –Fritz Hartnagel unexpectedly has a couple of days’ leave at the beginning of May. Although Sophie Scholl has only just arrived, she packs a few things and sets out again, to see Fritz. Over the last few years, Hartnagel has spent almost all his home leave with Sophie Scholl. He must be especially keen to see her now; he’s worried about his forthcoming deployment to the East. More than 15,000 German officers have already fallen in the ten months of war in the Soviet Union.

The marching orders First Lieutenant Fritz Hartnagel has received for his company instruct him and his men to head for Ukraine in the first instance. His signals unit is

being assigned to the 6<sup>th</sup> Army, which it is intended will play a central role in the planned summer offensive in Russia. The objective of the massive force has also already been determined – but is currently classified.

On 5<sup>th</sup> April 1942, Adolf Hitler specified in his War Directive No. 41, “In any event, every effort must be made to reach Stalingrad itself, or at least to bring the city under fire from heavy artillery so that it may no longer serve as an industrial or communications centre.” Almost three weeks later, the city makes its first appearance in a Wehrmacht communiqué. According to the report, squadrons of fighter aircraft have attacked a large Soviet armaments factory, achieving “numerous direct hits, followed by fires and explosions”. The battle for Stalingrad has begun, without any greater significance being attached to it in Germany. Hartnagel’s assignment to the 6<sup>th</sup> Army means he will not see Sophie for months. As a company commander on the Eastern front, he is unlikely to be granted any more leave for a long time.

They no doubt look out for each other on the platform at Tübingen. The two of them finally get to hug each other before travelling on to Freiburg im Breigau. They are keeping each other going through these ragged years. Hartnagel could be sent to any one of the many battle fronts at any time. His life has already been at risk on several occasions: under attack from British aircraft in France, and in Belgium, when a mine exploded right next to his vehicle. Sophie Scholl, too, has already lived through many air raids.

Despite the joy of having Fritz at her side again and being able to spend a few days with him, she also has something serious to discuss. During this train journey, she probably asks him a big favour: whether he can use his company stamp to authorise a ration coupon for a duplicating machine. A Wehrmacht stamp would make it much easier to procure the device.

The first lieutenant hesitates. He likes to make his girlfriend happy whenever he can, getting things from occupied France that are rationed in Germany: stockings, soap, chocolate and cocoa. Once, he arranged a coupon for a Leica camera for her older brother Hans Scholl, because cameras are almost impossible to get hold of. But what does she want with a duplicating machine?

Sophie Scholl also asks him for 1,000 Marks. What does she need the money for, he

wants to know. She replies merely, “a good cause”. Hartnagel guesses what she’s planning, but she doesn’t go into detail – and he doesn’t push her, either. “You do know it could cost you your head?” he warns her. “Yes, I do know that,” she answers determinedly. Once she’s made up her mind about something, she rarely changes it. She works most things out on her own – or by praying to God. For months now, she’s been thinking about the times she’s living in, about the war and its victims, about the freedom the National Socialists have taken from her.

Since the start of the war in September 1939, the regime has been taking a tougher and tougher line with its opponents. The SS is constructing new concentration camps and extending existing ones. The National Socialist judicial system is hunting down anyone who shows any doubt about the *Endsieg*, the “ultimate victory”. Anyone making derogatory comments about the Führer’s generalship or criticising the military situation faces arrest and detention, or the death penalty for *Wehrkraftzersetzung*, subversion of national defence. Such draconian penalties are intended to stifle all thoughts of resistance. One wrong word to the wrong person is enough to get you picked up by the Gestapo, Sophie Scholl knows that. And the constant need to hide what she thinks is getting her down.

But the young woman does not let herself become discouraged. In discussions with friends and family, she keeps on questioning the system. She has long since passed on her doubts to Fritz Hartnagel. He knows how critical his girlfriend is of the Nazi regime. And he also knows he cannot stop her once she has decided to take action. So he lets the matter of the ration coupon lie for now. He does, however, promise her the 1,000 Reichsmarks. Right now what’s important is collecting happy memories he can bring to mind when he’s in the East. He intends this short break in Freiburg to be one of them. They don’t have much time. Sophie Scholl and Fritz Hartnagel stay at the Freiburger Hof Hotel, as they have on a number of weekends over recent months, presenting themselves as a married couple. They even have rings to help with the camouflage; unmarried people can’t get a double room just like that, after all. The five-storey hotel, built in 1890, is situated in the middle of the historic old town, on what used to be Kaiserstrasse but is now known as Adolf-Hitler-Strasse. Close by are many shops, big department stores in art nouveau buildings, pubs, ornate fountains and a canal that

guests can look out over from the rooms at the back of the hotel. They both feel at home in Freiburg; they have often visited Freiburg Minster, a Gothic masterpiece whose beautiful and distinctive spire towers over the roofs of the old town.

With 140 beds, the Freiburger Hof is big enough to ensure the couple do not attract too much attention from the staff. It is dark outside. Like all Germany cities, Freiburg has strict blackout rules. No streetlamps, no lights from the windows illuminate the street. Even the car headlamps have been taped over, leaving only narrow slits. In any case, there's a curfew in force from midnight: you need a good reason to be out on the street after then.

People take air raid protection very seriously. They know what can happen when bombers target the city. Two years ago, on 10th May 1940, 57 Freiburg residents lost their lives in an air raid, including 22 children when a playground was bombed. There had been no warning before the attack, because the aircraft that attacked Freiburg were not enemy aircraft. They belonged to the Luftwaffe and had German pilots in their cockpits as they dropped German bombs on the German city. The strike was the result of a terrible error: three fighter planes lost their bearings and mistook Freiburg for a target in France. To cover up the incident, National Socialist state propaganda claims the attack was the work of the Allies. Many Germans believe this lie.

Sophie Scholl and Fritz Hartnagel say goodbye to each other on the evening of Monday 4<sup>th</sup> May 1942. The first lieutenant still doesn't know precisely when he and his men will leave for Ukraine. But their departure must be imminent. He's not likely to see his girlfriend again in the near future.

Sophie Scholl gets onto the train that will take her back to Munich. Hartnagel probably accompanies her onto the platform. Then he too tries to leave the city, but his connection is cancelled. No more trains are departing for Paris or Strasbourg that day and he will only be able to travel back to France on the Tuesday. Hartnagel spends another night at the Freiburger Hof; he's assigned a double room but has to share it with another lieutenant. The hotel staff return a nightgown to him that Sophie Scholl has left behind.

Fritz Hartnagel begins his return journey to Le Mans on 5<sup>th</sup> May. His command, a Luftwaffe signals unit, is preparing for the upcoming deployment. There'll be a good

deal of work waiting for him in France, because there’s still a lot to organise for the departure to the front. The Luftwaffe doesn’t just supply pilots and aircrew. The men in blue uniforms and beige overalls also run the airfields that cargo aircraft, bombers and interceptor aircraft take off from, operate anti-aircraft artillery, take care of supplies, and transport fuel and munitions. Some units are also assigned to army divisions. Last year, Hartnagel’s company was attached to the tank corps.

Having travelled for hours, he reaches Le Mans at midnight. Two lieutenants are waiting for him at the station. They take their commander to a party – one of his staff sergeants has been made an officer. Even if he’d rather be left alone to write a letter to his girlfriend and think about the wonderful time they had in Freiburg, he can’t get out of this celebration. And Hartnagel does not manage to write to Sophie Scholl the next day, either. As the company commander, he has to put in an appearance at an NCOs’ evening and stays with his men until two a.m. After the break with his girlfriend he feels like a stranger among his fellows; somehow, everything seems false: his service, the revelry, the war.

In a few days it will be the first anniversary of the German attack on the Soviet Union. The Wehrmacht crossed the border on 22 June 1941. Initially the units made rapid progress, occupying large parts of the country. A good two-fifths of the population are now under German rule. The Red Army has already lost several million soldiers.

Many Germans were then expecting their troops to make further quick gains: after all, the Führer and his propagandists had promised a rapid victory over the Bolsheviks. In early October 1941, people across the whole of the Greater German Reich had listened to a speech by Adolf Hitler on their Volksempfänger radio receivers, broadcast live from the Berlin Sportpalast. He described the war against Russia as the greatest battle in the history of the world, and the enemy as cruel, brutal and bestial. He blamed the conflict on the Jews. And to the relief of many of his followers, he said the Soviet Union was “already broken and will never rise again”.

Chief Press Officer Otto Dietrich took up the rallying cry, proclaiming to journalists the Reich’s imminent victory over Russia. The compliant press announced the impending triumph the next day. By this point, however, officers in the Wehrmacht high command and military men from Hitler’s immediate circle were already aware that the plans to

defeat the Soviets before the onset of winter had already been overtaken by reality. The German units lacked the necessary winter gear, fuel, munitions, weapons and vehicles to offset their enormous losses.

In October 1941, the advance came to a halt just short of Moscow, with the German tanks bogged down in mud. And the *Rasputitsa*, or mud season, was followed by winter: the first snows fell as early as October. The frozen ground did, however, provide a firm footing for the tanks, allowing them to advance again. In early December, Wehrmacht units got close to the western outskirts of Moscow, but the cold was causing the Germans increasing difficulty. Military doctors had to treat over 133,000 cases of frostbite. On 4 December, the temperature dropped to minus 40 degrees. Now the German machine guns failed, vehicles would not start, aircraft iced up and locomotive pipes, valves and pumps burst, making supply lines difficult to maintain. The era of easy victories for the Wehrmacht was finally over.

On St. Nicholas’ Day, 6<sup>th</sup> December, the Red Army launched a large-scale counteroffensive with fresh troops from Siberia, driving back the invaders from Moscow. The Germans only managed to hold the front line some 150 kilometres from the Russian capital. Then the icy winter brought an end to the big campaigns. Most of the front froze solid. Great battles were replaced by reciprocal shelling and attacks by small commandos and reconnaissance patrols.

At the end of 1941, many a German soldier had recalled the fate of Napoleon’s *Grande Armée*, which the French Emperor had led to Russia 129 years earlier, and which was ultimately overcome by the Tsar’s troops. Many officers on the Eastern Front read *With Napoleon in Russia*. Its author, Armand de Caulaincourt, had accompanied the Emperor on his flight from the Tsarist Empire and later wrote about the disaster in the East. Even Friedrich Paulus of the General Staff, who had planned the invasion of the USSR, was familiar with the work, having been given it as a gift by his wife. Before reading it, the General told her Russia might be defeated in four to six weeks. This bold prediction soon proved a serious misconception. Napoleon had at least taken Moscow in 1812. The Germans did not replicate his success.

When German soldiers on the Eastern Front in spring 1942 compare their situation with that of their counterparts in the earlier Russian campaign, they are faced with an

alarming precedent. Napoleon’s offensive bled out; his fighters starved or froze to death. Now the Germans’ losses are having fatal consequences. A report from the Army High Command dated 30 March 1942 shows the gaps torn by the fighting since June 1941. Of the 162 combat divisions originally deployed to the Eastern Front, only eight are available for future assaults. 1,167,835 men have been lost – fallen, wounded, taken prisoner, missing. The 16 German tank divisions in the Soviet Union now have a total of only 140 functioning combat vehicles – usually the number deployed by a single division.

As a simple lieutenant, Fritz Hartnagel is not aware of the precise number of casualties, but he has heard that the battles in the East are more deadly than in previous campaigns. On 8 May 1942, while he is still in France preparing his company for its imminent departure, the Axis launches its counteroffensive on the Kerch peninsula in the Crimea. The Wehrmacht leadership intends this to lay the foundations for the summer offensive in the south of the Eastern Front. German and Romanian troops advance, supported by continual air bombardment from the Luftwaffe.

Hartnagel’s soldiers know they will have to exchange their comfortable quarters in peaceful north-western France for spartan camps in the Russian war zone. In Le Mans, Hartnagel lives alone in a three-roomed house. Here, he can relax in the evenings, write letters, read and forget all about his day-to-day duties. The region rarely gets properly cold– even in January, the average temperature is a good five degrees. That will change in his next area of operations. The previous year has already given the officer a taste of how tough deployment to Russia can be; getting stuck on muddy tracks, sleeping in his tent or a truck, living in fear of Soviet air strikes. Last year, parts of the country seemed eerie to him, especially its broad marshland and gloomy forests, and the Russians seemed like seasoned warriors. And of course he knows that according to German plans, the campaign in Russia should have ended in victory long ago.

On 9<sup>th</sup> May, Fritz Hartnagel strolls through the narrow streets of Le Mans. The old town is an architectural gem and has suffered hardly any war damage so far. Le Mans is primarily known for its 24-hour race, though the event has been on hold since 1939. Hartnagel is keen to pick up a few presents for Sophie. He brought her gifts from his previous posting in France, in summer 1940: a jacket, chocolates, some coffee,

delicacies that were difficult to get hold of in wartime Germany. Sophie always shared these treats with her family, so her parents and siblings benefited from Hartnagel’s generosity, too. He had also obtained some comfortable, wide-fitting shoes for her mother, Magdalena Scholl. Magdalena had tried in vain for months to get a ration coupon for them in Ulm, but the officials had sent her away, explaining that you could only get new ones every two or three years. Anyone wanting a new pair had to present their old shoes at the coupons applications office, where they would be thoroughly inspected. In the first instance, though, the officials usually required the shoes in question to be re-soled and mended before they would issue coupons for new ones. Hartnagel goes to various shops, looking for things that will bring pleasure to Sophie Scholl; after all, today is her birthday. She has made a few requests. But he is out of luck. The leather shoes his girlfriend desires are only available in smaller sizes. And they’re made of substandard materials, he thinks. He hopes to find better quality in Paris, if he gets to the French capital again.

German soldiers send thousands and thousands of packages to Germany, because all kinds of goods are still freely available in the occupied territories, whereas at home almost all foodstuffs, consumer goods and textiles are rationed. Many soldiers simply take the things they want without paying for them. The men call this “organising”. Since early 1942, many households have not been able to get essential goods such as coal. On 6<sup>th</sup> April, the regime reduced the weekly bread and meat allowance for all citizens, and the butter and margarine ration per capita. Anyone buying food in the shops or going to a restaurant has to present a ration card, a permit and their ID card. And it has become compulsory for all Germans to eat stew on Sundays. Soldiers in the Western European occupied territories generally eat better than their relatives do at home.

On 9 May 1942, Sophie Scholl invites a few friends round to her brother Hans’ room. They toast to her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, and enjoy cake and wine sent by her family from Ulm. From Fritz Hartnagel, the birthday girl receives a letter: “Oh, if only I could help bring peace and joy to your heart.” She should just head off on a trip, he writes, so that she can be on her own. Fritz is the one who understands her best. He knows from her letters that she is longing for peace amidst the hustle and bustle of Munich, and he is worrying about her. In fact, Sophie Scholl has very little time to herself. It’s more important, he

says, that she find firm ground to stand on than that she try to graft on any new knowledge. “I’d so much like to come and see you again for a few days,” Fritz Hartnagel writes. But the first lieutenant knows all too well that he won’t be getting any more leave: “So, sadly, you shouldn’t take my plans too seriously.”

In Russia, the Red Army begins its first big offensive of the year on 12<sup>th</sup> May. Prior to that, the damp spring weather has been turning the roads into a mire, preventing a larger-scale attack by ground forces. The mud hindered both sides. Now the rain has stopped, the tanks and assault guns can roll onward again. Stalin has instructed his troops to surround the German army, which is deployed to the region around Kharkov. But the German generals have had advance warning of the Soviet trap from their intelligence service, and have anticipated this move. Adolf Hitler has ordered the Army Group to take Kharkov. The city is situated in the middle of the front and is a key transportation hub. Whoever controls Kharkov controls the region’s roads and railways. It is Hartnagel’s greatest desire to visit his girlfriend one more time before he travels east. And in mid-May he is actually granted the leave he has been longing for. While he hurries to Munich, his company sets off from Le Mans by rail, in the direction of Russia. Sophie Scholl has the time to meet up. She is due to start her studies this month, but her seminars and lectures haven’t begun yet. The Ulm native is living in a quiet suburb far from the university. She has found lodgings with Carl Muth, a Reformed Catholic intellectual and opponent of the Nazi regime. The journal he publishes, *Hochland* [Uplands] was banned by the National Socialists last year. Muth managed not to mention Adolf Hitler even once in his publication, but his critical stance did not escape the regime.

Hans Scholl is in close contact with the academic: he organised Muth’s library for him and views him as a mentor. The Scholls regularly send the elderly gentleman fruit and vegetables from Ulm, a crate of apples, maybe, or a few plums. He is happy to welcome Sophie Scholl into his house in Solln.

In Munich this spring, Sophie Scholl and Fritz Hartnagel behave just like any other couple in love. They make the most of their time together, talking and taking long walks. The tall, thin officer with the serious face and the dark eyes and the smaller soon-to-be student with eyes that are just as dark and brown, chin-length hair stroll through the

parks together; perhaps they visit the English Garden Sophie Scholl is so fond of. Hartnagel also accompanies his girlfriend as she takes an important step in her education, enrolling at Ludwig Maximilian University.

While Hartnagel is stopping over in Munich, a resistance group in Berlin is challenging the Nazi regime. On 18 May, Communists associated with the 30-year-old Herbert Baum carry out an arson attack on an anti-Soviet propaganda exhibition. In a tent village in the Lustgarten [Pleasure Gardens], they ignite a canister full of flammable liquid, damaging an exhibition known as The Soviet Paradise, which denigrates the USSR, depicting the Slavs as subhuman; the exhibits include a collective farm, seized weapons and a secret service death row cell. At the same time, a number of resistance groups distribute anti-war leaflets in the capital. Although the National Socialists try to keep the attack a secret, rumours abound and there are reports in the foreign press. After all, after years of dictatorship these kinds of events are a rarity in Germany. Scholl and Hartnagel presumably hear nothing of the Berlin incident in Munich. But they have caught wind of the doings of other brave opponents of the regime. Persons unknown have posted envelopes containing critical writings through the Scholls' door on a number of occasions, without any return address. In spring 1942, printed copies of the sermons of Clemens August Graf von Galen, Bishop of Münster, arrived in the family's mailbox. The Catholic clergyman denounced the murder of patients in sanatoriums and nursing homes and openly criticised the Nazi regime. The Scholl family knew that Galen's allegations were true. As early as 1941, a former colleague of Sophie's mother, with whom she had worked at the Grafeneck Samaritans Foundation, reported that residents with disabilities kept on being picked up and then disappearing. Von Galen also condemned the Gestapo's crackdowns on the church. The Gestapo was one of the foremost instruments in the National Socialists' machinery of persecution. Its officials could take people into *Schutzhaft*, or "protective custody", consigning suspects to prisons or concentration camps without court orders. Hans Scholl is impressed by the Bishop's courage. He announces to his family that they must get a duplicating machine. Sophie Scholl mentioned a machine like this on the train journey from Tübingen to Freiburg, and Fritz Hartnagel is troubled, because what she is planning sounds like resistance and that will put her life at risk. But when they

meet in Munich, they probably don't talk about the coupon and what it will be used for. They don't want these worries to cast a dampener on their last hours before Hartnagel's deployment. Sophie Scholl doesn't acquaint her boyfriend with her plans. She doesn't want to burden him – and she probably also wants to avoid putting him in danger if she is investigated by the Gestapo someday.

In Munich, the two of them take time for each other. Whilst Hans Scholl and his friend Alexander Schmorell are getting together with fellow students in the English Garden, lying on the grass at night and drinking wine, the couple probably keep mostly to themselves. At any rate, Fritz Hartnagel does not get to know his girlfriend's new friends. Sophie Scholl gives her boyfriend a goodbye present, two volumes of the sermons of John Henry Newman, an Anglican priest who converted to Catholicism in 1845 and became a Cardinal. “To conscience first, and to the Pope afterwards,” is his motto. Newman set great store by the freedom of the individual, and his ideas have made an impression on Sophie Scholl.

On this day, the newspapers are jubilant. “Three Soviet armies destroyed,” trumpets the front page of the Brandenburg *Briesetal Bote*. “Entirety of Kerch Strait taken,” reports the East Prussian *Königsberger Allgemeine Zeitung*. The *Teltower Kreisblatt*, another Brandenburg paper, announces in bold letters, “150,000 prisoners taken in Kerch”. 447 Soviet tanks have been destroyed, its columns report, and 45 “Bolshevik aircraft” have been shot down. Yet these German military successes are unlikely to be of much interest to Sophie Scholl and Fritz Hartnagel. They are far more concerned with a more important question: will they ever see each other again?

Shortly before the execution, Sophie Scholl is allowed to see her parents one more time. Their youngest daughter tries to console them. The judgment will create a stir, she predicts. To the very end, she remains convinced her fate will make many people sit up and think, that the resistance will be continued by others. As they part, her mother says to her, “So I won’t ever see you coming through the door again?” And Sophie answers, “Oh mother, I’m only missing a few years’ more life.” Her parents still do not know the authorities intend to carry out the execution today. “Sophie, remember: Jesus,” is the final solace offered by Magdalena Scholl. “Yes,” replies her daughter, who at that point has less than an hour to live, “but you, too.” Magdalena and Robert Scholl travel back to Ulm, hoping their plea for clemency will yet be given a hearing.

In Stadelheim, Hans Scholl speaks with the Protestant prison chaplain, Karl Alt. The minister has been informed of the impending execution by telephone and has hurried to the prison. Collectedly, Hans Scholl shakes his visitor’s hand. The condemned man asks the pastor to read out two excerpts from the Bible. The first comes from Psalm 90: “Lord, teach us to count our days, that we may gain a wise heart. Turn, O Lord! How long? Have compassion on your servants.” He also wants to hear the Gift of Love from 1 Corinthians. Then they celebrate Holy Communion. When Alt asks if he feels hatred or bitterness towards the prosecutors and the judge, Scholl replies, “No. Evil shall not be repaid with evil, and all bitterness is erased.”

Next, the minister goes to see Sophie Scholl. She has just written letters of farewell to her family and Fritz Hartnagel. She too prays with Alt and takes Holy Communion; like her brother, Sophie Scholl has chosen Psalm 90. The minister stays with her in the cell until a warder knocks on the heavy door. The officials lead the young woman out. She walks upright, her face showing no emotion.

Christoph Probst asks Munich chaplain Heinrich Sperr to baptise him. In the few hours that remain between judgment and execution, he professes the Catholic faith. He has long wanted to become a member of the church; his three children have already been baptised as Catholics. He now takes this same step, in prison, shortly before he takes his final walk. Probst writes to his mother, “I thank you for giving me life – it was the only path to God.”

The prison officers allow the three condemned students to meet one last time before their execution. “I didn’t know it could be so easy to die,” says Christoph Probst. “In a few moments we’ll meet again in eternity.” Then one by one, they are led away, starting with Sophie Scholl. She goes with the officers, showing no fear. The warders are amazed at how calmly she bears it all.

Later, even Johann Reichhart, the executioner, says that he has never seen anyone face his guillotine with such courage. Reichhart has worked as an executioner since 1924, having taken over the position from his uncle Franz Xaver Reichhart; he is said to be the busiest hangman in the National Socialist state. He has a fold-out guillotine and he and his assistants travel to Baden, Bavaria, Bohemia, Hesse, Saxony, Württemberg and Austria, carrying out the sentences of the National Socialist courts. At 49 years of age, Reichhart has already killed hundreds of people: in 1942 alone he was paid for 746 beheadings. This bloody trade is making the trained butcher a wealthy man. Before the National Socialists came to power, there were so few executions Reichhart could hardly make a living. Now business is booming. The hangman is grateful to his new masters and has joined the Nazi Party, the National Socialist Motor Corps, the German Labour Front and other Party organisations. These days he has so much to do that he often performs several executions on the same day. On 22 February 1943 he is paid to put Sophie Scholl, Hans Scholl and Christoph Probst to death.

Since 1937 the prison has had a wooden barracks in the grounds, and this is where Reichhart goes about his business. His assistants lead Sophie Scholl to the killing machine and public prosecutor Walter Roemer issues the writ of execution. At 5pm Reichhart pulls the lever that releases the blade. “The sentence has been carried out,” he says a minute later. Then the doctor confirms she is dead. Reichhart’s assistants scatter sawdust to cover up the blood. They place the body and the head in a coffin.

At 5.02 the warders lead Hans Scholl into the hut. Calmly and collectedly, he comes before the hangman and cries, “Long live freedom,” before he is put to the guillotine. An official notes coolly in the execution protocol, “Time from delivery to executioner to fall of blade: 7 seconds.” Then the executioner kills Christoph Probst, too. The corpses are transferred to the Headquarters of the Munich Police.

The next morning, Magdalena Scholl writes to Fritz Hartnagel. She does not yet know

that both her children have already been executed, and is reporting on her visit to Stadelheim. “Sophie and Hans were so composed and so resigned to death that I was very consoled. Sophie was smiling and leaning gently against the radiator. Her eyes were shining in a way I had never seen before.” Then she asks Hartnagel, as a combatant in the Battle of Stalingrad, to submit a plea for clemency to the State Prosecutor at the People’s Court. She posts her letter before the wife of one of Robert Scholl’s customers arrives at the apartment with a copy of the *Neu Ulmer Zeitung* newspaper. She shows Magdalena the notice of the execution of Sophie and Hans Scholl in Munich. This is how the parents find out their children have been killed.

Elisabeth Scholl, who works as a children’s nurse on a farm near Ingolstadt, has just registered her new position with the employment office and now sits down in a café, waiting for her bus. She reaches for the paper. On the front page, in huge letters, stands, “Condemned to death for high treason. Judgment has already been carried out.” Then Elisabeth Scholl reads the names she knows so well. “The prisoners typically acted alone, daubing buildings with subversive demands and preparing highly treasonous pamphlets that besmirched the German people’s national defence and desecrated their spirit of defiance,” the accompanying article states. No-one has prepared Elisabeth Scholl for this; she is completely alone with the terrible news.

The same day, Alexander Schmorell’s flight almost comes to an end when he is stopped by the police. Two officials ask to see his papers. They initially think his Bulgarian passport, which was produced by Lilo Berndl and given to him by Hamazaspian, is a forgery, but then let Schmorell move on. Since the fugitive does not know where to go, he decides to return to Munich.