

CAIF Presentation to Coventry German Circle
Peace Delegates - Friedensdelegierte
Saturday 12th September 2026

My talk today will be on the subject of “Friedensdelegierte”, Peace Delegates - one in particular - and I hope that I can show that this is relevant to the Coventry-German Circle.

I start with a photograph taken in early 1949 and I will come back to explain it as my story unfolds. I have divided my talk into a number of short “chapters” and I hope that the subject of each of these sections does not offend.

WAR & PEACE

80 years is a long time. The 80 years since the end of WW2 have been a long period of relative peace in our continent of Europe but – in conjunction with its erstwhile ally, the USA – Europe has struggled with maintaining peace, if not with permitting other people in the world to enjoy peace wherever they live and under whichever political system. We aspire to be peacemakers but others within our so-called “developed” society have a vested interest – for many different reasons – in maintaining what has become today “perpetual” or “permanent” war.

As regards the Coventry Association for International Friendship (CAIF) I have the hope – as misguided as it might be – that we are continuing the mission of peace, reconciliation and friendship which was initiated in Coventry on the morning after the destruction of a large part of the city and, in particular, of the Cathedral of St Michael, where we are located for this gathering.

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Between 1944 – starting with Stalingrad – Coventry established 26 twin cities, at least a half of them by 1960, though today, of course, we have only 25, as Volgograd is now “paused”.

The members of CAIF move within the spaces that remain today between the city of Coventry and its still active twin cities – Dresden, Kiel and Cork – but also with what we call our friendship towns in Germany and France, with Meschede and with Vannes.

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The 20th Century was a bloody period of constant contestation which saw the emergence of fascism which took various forms but which reached its violent apogee in National Socialism in Germany – Nazism.

Victory in Europe was formalised on 8th May 1945 when Germany’s surrender was officially ratified in Berlin, and fighting formally ended. From that point onwards Germany as it was then formed – in four zones of occupation – began its long process of social and political repair and reconstitution. The story that I will speak about is very much related

to the rise of Nazism, the effect that it had on so many peoples' lives and the attempt to reconstruct Germany after WW2.

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THE CAUSE OF PACIFISM

This is the story of Irmgard Rode, who I show here during World War II with one of her brothers - who had been conscripted into the Wehrmacht - an aunt, and her father.

Irmgard was a Catholic from Meschede in the Hochsauerland and was of what most people would regard as left-wing political inclination. She was born Irmgard Anna Paula Beckmann on June 29, 1911, in Hüls, on the outskirts of the small town of Marl about 50 kilometres north-west of Dortmund. She was the eldest of five children born to the Catholic schoolteacher Joseph Beckmann and his wife Theresia. Joseph Beckmann was born in 1886 and, after World War I, he became the headmaster of the village school in Kinderhaus, near Münster. Irmgard's parents were married in 1910 and were avowed pacifists, a trait much inherited and embraced by Irmgard. Two of Irmgard's brothers, Ivo and Egon, were to die as soldiers in World War Two, in 1943 and 1944 respectively.

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Irmgard's story is a long and detailed one, far too much to relate here but I want to pick out certain facts from her upbringing and family background that led ultimately to her becoming as engaged with the people of Coventry as she became.

Growing up Irmgard helped her parents by supervising and caring for her younger brothers and, after completing her secondary education, she worked as a nanny. Her early years, obviously, took place against the backdrop of the turmoil which Germany experienced after the defeat in 1918 – the Weimar Republic and the rise of Hitler's National Socialists.

In 1937, she married the lawyer Dr. Alfons Rode (1901–1987), who was ten years her senior.

After completing his own secondary education, Alfons Rode - who also came from a Catholic-pacifist family background - studied law and political science in Münster.

While still a student he joined the Peace League of German Catholics (Friedensbund Deutscher Katholiken [FdK]), an anti-war movement founded after World War I to promote pacifism and Christian reconciliation. Alfons may have been influenced by his future father-in-law, Joseph Beckmann.

OPPOSING THE RISE OF AUTHORITARIANISM

From around 1930 onwards, the Nazis began making inroads into rural areas, violently disrupting their opponents' events. Members of the Catholic Merchants' Association,

workers' associations, and other groups formed a "Catholic League" and Alfons Rode became active as the leader of the local branch in Kinderhaus. He said:

"The group was strongly religious in orientation; together with the group from Münster and those from other localities around the city, we provided security at many election rallies - particularly in Münster - and engaged in brawls with rampaging Nazis in connection with these events. Even at events preceding the seizure of power, the police stood by idly while such disturbances and fights took place. Because of my position in the 'League' and my conduct as an opponent of the Nazis at their events in our village, I was particularly loathed by them - especially by the local group leader."

By the time the National Socialists came to power in 1933, Rode had already completed several stages of his legal traineeship and even finished his doctoral thesis in law. However, the new regime placed major obstacles in his path regarding the upcoming "Assessor" examination - the final state exam for lawyers)

Candidates were required to spend weeks in camps for paramilitary training and ideological indoctrination as the Nazi judicial apparatus sought to mould a new generation of lawyers that aligned with its own agenda.

Rode demonstrated strong academic performance but repeatedly failed the examination due to his known unreliability regarding his worldview. Nevertheless, thanks to the "special intervention of the President of the Regional Court in Münster," he gained entry into the senior administrative judicial service and was ultimately able to pass the inspector's examination in Hamm in the summer of 1936 with top marks.

He was at the same time a leader of the Kinderhaus group of the NS-Reich Air Raid Protection League - founded in April 1933, by Reich Aviation Minister Hermann Göring - and this went in his favour, serving as a "substitute" for his lack of Party membership.

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Irmgard and Alfons settled in Meschede in 1937, the year that they married. In November 1938, Dr. Rode witnessed the smashing of Jewish merchants' shop windows in Meschede and saw Nazis driving a lawyer named Aloys Entrup through the streets, taunting him as a "lackey of the Jews." Within his close circle of acquaintances, people often "clenched their fists in their pockets" in silent anger but saw no possibility for public protest - especially after the outbreak of the war. Alfons was forced to leave the Sauerland region:

"In the winter of 1940/41, I was seconded to the German judicial administration in Litzmannstadt (Łódź) and was conscripted into the Wehrmacht there in the early summer of 1944. In the spring of 1945, I was taken prisoner by the French in the Black Forest; after two years of captivity, I returned to Meschede. A few months later, I was able to take up my post at the Meschede District Court."

DEALING WITH COLLABORATION

I leave it to your own knowledge and experience to provide the narrative for what happened during the period 1939-1945 but I do want to refer to the issue of membership of the NSDAP, the National Socialist German Workers' Party, and the phenomenon of collaboration with the regime.

By 1945, membership of the NSDAP amounted to almost 9 million, representing about one in five adult Germans but many more in the population collaborated with or tolerated the regime for various reasons – shared political goals, coercion or simple survival.

Prior to the outbreak of World War II, nearly forty thousand German Catholics were involved in the German Catholic Peace League, a movement that caused many people to seriously reconsider the dimension of pacifism in their faith. But, during the course of the War many of these same German Catholics raised no serious objection to serving in Germany's armies or swearing allegiance to Hitler.

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From late 1940 onwards Irmgard Rode had to manage daily life for her family in Meschede without her husband and, as the defeat of National Socialism neared she was involved in caring for wounded soldiers at a military hospital and, immediately after the end of the war, she enjoyed the trust of the British occupation forces. Even before the occupying powers permitted the first free local elections in 1948, they appointed her to Meschede's municipal and administrative councils. She served on both bodies from the collapse in 1945 until 1948 and throughout her life, she worked tirelessly on behalf of the socially disadvantaged and for international understanding.

Around this time, Irmgard was in contact with a man named Josef Rütter, a left-wing Catholic from Brilon. Rütter believed that democratic reconstruction was only possible if key political and social positions were no longer held by Nazis. Together, Rütter and Irmgard believed that in 1945 there were circles within Catholicism interested in a rigorous reckoning with the Nazi past and in developing alternatives to the 'restorative' reconstruction that ultimately took place and they sought to create a category for individuals who had not been NSDAP members but had shared fundamental Nazi ideas or facilitated the rise of the Nazi movement – they were clearly targeting circles comprising German nationalists, right-wing supporters of the Centre Party, heavy industry, and the large landowners east of the Elbe.

These individuals had often refrained from joining the NSDAP because they considered the party of a 'house painter' - with its rowdy Stormtroopers – the SA or *Sturmabteilung* - beneath their social standing; nevertheless, they had supported National Socialism financially or politically and had backed the regime after the transfer of power. In forming their approach, Rode and Rütter highlighted a point that, for the emerging Federal Republic, was to become a serious liability, since this very group of people - untainted by party membership - rapidly gained access to the decisive levers of power. Furthermore, Rode and Rütter sought to draw a precise distinction between opponents of the Nazis driven by inner conviction and those motivated by personal rivalry.

Rüther and Irmgard witnessed first-hand the injustices and adversities that accompanied so-called "denazification":

"It was particularly agonizing for opponents of the Nazi regime to watch as former neighbours and colleagues - whose party careers they had observed - secured safe positions again, while they themselves, or other known dissidents, were left out in the cold".

Irmgard, a supporter of the "Pax Christi" movement, commented to Rüther:

"I would actually like to withdraw from politics, but every single person counts here - because Nazism keeps trying to regain the upper hand. You live in constant fear and mistrust and can never find peace; things get quite turbulent here at times."

THE PERSISTENCE OF ARYAN ATTITUDES

Before we finally get back to the photograph with which I began this talk one particular event has to be addressed as it forms such a typical and symbolic moment in the post-war history of the Hochsauerland.

In March 1945, as the US Army was moving up from the south, not long before the end of the Second World War, soldiers from the V-weapon "Division zur Vergeltung" (Division for Vengeance) murdered 208 Soviet and Polish forced labourers - including children and an infant - in the Arnsberg forest, near to Eversberg, not far out of Meschede. Over the course of three nights, the unit, operating under SS-Obergruppenführer Hans Kammler, committed the most severe atrocity of the war's final phase within the German Reich outside of prisons, concentration camps, and "death marches."

A few weeks after the massacres, the area was liberated by American troops, who discovered the first and second graves. The Americans heard about the killings from German informers. The soldiers, intending for the massacre to be revealed to the public, proceeded to organize the entire local German population (civilians and informers) to view the exhumation of the bodies.

The man who issued the orders, Hans Kammler - an architect and Waffen-SS general - ordered the executions. According to his driver at the time, Kammler took his own life in Prague on May 9, 1945. In doing so, he evaded accountability for one of the worst Nazi crimes just before the war ended.

In 1947 Irmgard and Josef Rüther were centrally involved in having a Sühnekreuz (Cross of Atonement) erected. This took place on 4th May of that year but it proved to be a controversial act as there was persistent resistance among the population of Meschede to remembering this past with even the local pastor opposed to the erection of it.

The cross was desecrated four times and, subsequently, it was dismantled and buried at a secret location in ground known only to Irmgard and her family. In 1964, a group of students from Meschede managed to locate the burial site and dug it up. As no one

showed any interest in the cross, it remained hidden in Irmgard's garage until 1982, when it finally found its place within the former confessional chapel of the Church of the Assumption of Mary ("Mariä Himmelfahrt").

Irmgard's feelings about de-nazification must have been confirmed by the response that she got during a discussion about the cross with a CDU man who said: "They should have shot not 80, but 800".

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Even before the principle of equal rights for men and women was enshrined in the Basic Law - a process that faced considerable resistance - Irmgard was making her mark in Meschede as a self-assured politician involving herself in schools' and early years policies and in helping with the settlement and integration of the many refugees from the East who arrived in the Hochsauerland region via Meschede. In particular, she encouraged the sharing of traditional folk culture. Unlike in right-wing "homeland" circles, however, she did this not to exclude others but as a means of building bridges between people of widely varying backgrounds. Later, her work in international exchange would also demonstrate that the "regional" aspect holds significance for inhabitants of landscapes across the globe and that, for people shaped by vastly different cultures, discovering this can provide a great source of inspiration. One might suppose that this activity was the precursor to her being an early pioneer of the local Caritas conference.

The integration of displaced persons in the Sauerland region appears to have been a success but, immediately after 1945, compassion and practical solidarity were by no means a given: the town of Meschede had been largely destroyed by bombing, and the residents themselves were suffering from food shortages. In her search for allies, Irmgard Rode even encountered racist prejudices in some instances, as she later recounted:

"Of course, some of that Nazi mindset still lingered in our community. I was once deeply shaken when an influential person - whom I had asked to help me find work for these people - said to me: 'We have to be very careful here when people from other areas come to us. We have to be on the lookout to see if they are actually Aryan. Pay close attention. Look, there are some who are dark-haired, and we have to be wary of that. That won't do. Aryan heritage is extremely important to us.'"

Few people perceived - as sensitively as Irmgard Rode did - that the poison of fascism continued to exert its influence on everyday life for a long time.

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PEACE DELEGATES

And so, we come back to the picture that I started with.

What you see is a party of six people from the state of North Rhine-Westphalia including Irmgard Rode, the only woman, who, in early 1949, came to Coventry to learn about the forms of local self-government and democracy operating in Great Britain at the time.

The leader of the group was Herr Dr. Adolf Flecken, a native of Neuss, near to Düsseldorf, who was appointed to a ministerial post in the then-young Federal Republic of Germany eventually becoming Minister of the Interior and, subsequently, North Rhine-Westphalia's Finance Minister from 1952 to 1956.

The remaining four members of the delegation were Herr Dr. Smeets, Town Clerk of Lobberich, near the Dutch frontier, Herr Hans Falliner, a local government official from Bonn, Herr Arnold Knipping, Deputy Mayor of Kierape, in Westphalia, and Herr Karl Hetstedt, a local government official of Cologne. Irmgard Rode was, obviously, the only woman in the group.

During their time in the city the delegation attended lectures given by various officials of the City Council but, importantly, Irmgard seems to have struck up a rapport with Mary Barnes who was the City's Children's Officer.

After returning from the visit to Coventry, Irmgard Rode published an article on March 12, 1949, about her experiences visiting England, highlighting the warm hospitality of the city. The friendship which she had struck up with Mary Barnes evolved into a long-standing partnership between Coventry and Meschede, consisting of regular exchanges over the following decades.

Here are some early examples –

Miss Mary Barnes, Coventry City Council's Children's Officer, possibly with a group of young people from Coventry making a visit to Meschede, date unknown.

Mary Barnes and German visitors, with Pastor Sauerwald of Meschede in Coventry in 1963.

Provost Williams took the Cross of Nails from Coventry to Germany, and in a historical meeting with Willy Brandt he asked him to make the Cross of Nails a symbol of confidence between the two nations. Provost Williams received many honours for his international work and was awarded the 'Bundesverdienstkreuz'.

A group of young people from Meschede with Irmgard Rode on a visit to Coventry during the 1960's.

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Amongst the founders of the CCIU was Dr. William Rose who was involved in many exchanges between Coventry and Meschede having met Irmgard Rode early on in her encounters with Coventrians.

Dr Rose taught French at King Henry VIII School for 25 years and was a tireless worker for international reconciliation. He wrote "Sent from Coventry" in 1978-79 - an account of the city's relations with the rest of the world. He had close connections with Coventry Cathedral and was vice-chairman of the Coventry Committee for International Understanding. He was also President of the Coventry German Circle. He died in August 1982 and the Will Rose Trust was set up in his name.

In December 1968, together with Konrad Hengsbach, founded the peace organization "Freunde der Völkerbegegnung" (FdV; Friends of International Encounters), which has remained active to the present day, continuing the work that Irmgard started from the early 1950's building and maintaining links with locations such as Montebourg and Vannes in France, Petrozavodsk in Russia, Coventry/Rhode Island as well as Coventry UK.

Here are some pictures from later years in CAIF's relationship with Meschede.

A joint group of friends from Coventry, Vannes and Meschede in Germany in 2018.

The most recent visit by a group from Meschede to Coventry, August 2026 which includes the youngest daughter of Irmgard, Angelika Rode.

We are still living in the shadow of total destruction and international Peace and Friendship has never been more important and needed

At a time when social fragmentation and cultural polarisation are very much on the rise, international friendship - based on solidarity, empathy, creativity and inter-cultural exchange – has never been more necessary

I am indebted to Peter Bürger, a Meschede-born writer who published the book on Irmgard Rode.

„Das Leben zum Guten wenden“:
Über die Meschederin
Irmgard Rode (1911-1989),
zugleich ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der
katholischen Friedensbewegung im Sauerland

<http://www.sauerlandmundart.de/pdfs/daunlots%2075.pdf>