

COMMENT

Revisiting Carl Krepper, American Pastor and Nazi Saboteur

by J. FRANCIS WATSON



The archives of the First German St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Newark, New Jersey, are contained in the parish archives of Redeemer Lutheran Church (Irvington, NJ) and are housed at the Lutheran Archives Center at Philadelphia. They include a number of items that supplement the background of Carl Krepper, pastor and convicted saboteur. For the basic story, see "Carl Krepper, American Pastor and Nazi Saboteur," *Lutheran Quarterly* 23 (2009): 388-405.

Included in the St. John's archives is a presentation Luther Bible signed by German President Paul von Hindenburg, dated October 13, 1933, on the occasion of St. John's 100th anniversary. This Bible is an example of the proud German-American tradition that was alive in the congregation during its history, both before and after Krepper's ministry there from 1932 to 1935. During his espionage trial in 1945 Krepper said that he had first met Walter Kappe, who later trained Krepper in Germany for his work as a Nazi agent, at a memorial service for President Hindenburg in New York City.

Within the St. John's archives, the parish protocol (church council records) contains contextual material for understanding the roots of Carl Krepper's work as a Nazi agent. The November 13, 1934, church council report mentions a church service at St. John's with the pro-Nazi organization the "Friends of New Germany" (founded in 1933). This is further proof of what came out at Krepper's trial, that he knew the organizers of what became the German-American Bund. Krepper not only knew the organizers of the Friends of New Germany; as a pastor he supported their work. That Krepper could be a link between the Nazi saboteurs and the Bundists in America would only make sense if he actually had such contact with Bundists. When he was sent by Lieutenant Kappe from Germany back to the United States in December 1941 Krepper was indeed capable of making these very important connections between the sabotage agents and the Bundists in the Newark area.

Carl Krepper was arrested in Newark on December 20, 1944, after an FBI sting operation directed under J. Edgar Hoover. Krepper's arrest and trial were covered extensively in the pages of the *Newark Evening News*. This Newark paper published several photos of Krepper from his time as pastor of St. John's Church and after his arrest on charges of espionage. One, published on October 20, 1932, shows Krepper as a graduate of Rutgers University (BA, 1931); he also received his MA from the New Brunswick Theological Seminary in 1934. A second photo, shown here, shows Krepper after his arrest on December 20, 1944 (*Newark Evening News*, courtesy of the Newark Public Library).

The contrast between Krepper's work as an American pastor and as a Nazi saboteur was brought out vividly in Krepper's espionage trial in Newark. According to the February 21, 1945, *Newark Evening News*, the Assistant United States Attorney Vincent E. Hull, who led the prosecution case for the United States government, asked Krepper about the arrest of Pastor Martin Niemöller. At the time of Krepper's trial in February 1945 Niemöller was in Dachau Concentration Camp. According to the newspaper account, Hull: "Asked why 'Pastor Niemöller was arrested in Germany?' Krepper replied: 'Because he said the German people were bestowing upon Hitler the honors that only belong to God.'" The contrast between the imprisonment of Martin Niemöller in Germany and Carl Krepper in America was as evident in 1945 as it is in the twenty-first century.



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