

Milly Zirker, “Republican Defense”: Letter to the Editor of *Vossische Zeitung* (August 17, 1924)

Abstract

In this 1924 letter to the editor, the journalist, humanitarian, and fervent supporter of the Republic, Milly Zirker, enjoins her fellow supporters to vigorously defend the constitution. A few days earlier, a reader of the *Vossische Zeitung* had written a letter to the paper describing how a young woman had courageously defended herself against anti-republican harassment by a young Nazi on the train from Wannsee to Berlin. The letter by the unknown author is reproduced here first. Zirker opens her letter by identifying herself as the woman who fought off the young Nazi who had harassed her on the train on August 11, as she was coming from a Constitution Day celebration. Her letter then went on to give two more recent examples of citizens upholding the honor of the Republic. In one, a man parried the hostile actions of a member of the antisemitic and paramilitary Young German Order [*Jungdeutscher Orden*] during a bus ride. In the other, a man confronted a backer of the violent, far-right antisemite Richard Kunze—known as “Cudgel Kunze” [*Knüppel-Kunze*—by wielding an August 1st news clipping that reported on the rescue of Kunze by a Jewish physician in the resort town of Leba. According to the physician, a Dr. Posener, Kunze had gotten into turbulent water, when Posener—who knew the wind and tide conditions well—swam out to Kunze and brought him safely to shore.

Zirker enjoyed a storied career in the interwar period as an editor and prolific contributor to the newspaper *8-Uhr Abendblatt* and the progressive journal *Die Weltbühne*. She also engaged actively in the work of the *Deutsche Liga für Menschenrechte*, Germany’s leading human-rights organization at the time, and helped to launch the short-lived Republican Party of Germany in 1924, which sought to strengthen the Republic’s democratic institutions and welfare operations. In the May 1924 elections, the party only managed to secure 45,722 votes, or 0.2% of the vote, which caused it to fold soon thereafter. The August 11 holiday, meanwhile, from whose celebration Zirker was returning at the time of her attack, was the Weimar Republic’s national holiday from 1921 to 1932, commemorating the 1919 signing of Germany’s new constitution by President Friedrich Ebert. Although Constitution Day enjoyed the status as a national holiday, Germany’s individual federal states could decide whether or not to make it a legal one, and some—including conservative Bavaria—chose not to do so.

Source

1. On the Last Train from Wannsee.

A reader wrote the following to us:

I was riding home on the last train from Wannsee the night before last—on the fifth anniversary of the constitution. Two cheerful young people, who are obviously coming from a celebration of the constitution, get into our compartment. The young lady is holding a teddy bear she won in a raffle, into whose thick paws she has coquettishly placed a bouquet of white carnations and a small black, red, and gold paper flag.

Her blond companion leaves the train in Friedenau with a friendly farewell.

When the train starts moving again, the person seated across from the lady bumps into the black, red, and gold flag without saying “excuse me.” A scrutinizing glance seeks to determine whether this contact

was accidental or intentional. A minute later, the man adorned with a swastika—which I only now noticed—bumps into the flag a second time, this time apparently intentionally. Two blue eyes flash at him so defiantly that he blurts out: “Damn Jewish flag!”

“You – fellow citizen,” says the Republican woman with admirable confidence and calm, “watch out that I don’t smash that Jewish flag and a pair of Republican fists around your ears and your murderer’s insignia so hard that you lose your hearing and sight!”

The swastika-wearing youth flinches, as if he were not facing a delicate beauty, but in fact a pair of Republican fists at the back of his neck. He says nothing and leaves the compartment at Steglitz station in a hurry.

As our train rolls on, he stands on the platform, still completely bewildered; he does not seem to live in Steglitz. So he probably had to walk home that night, because, as I said, it was the last train.

A Lichterfelder.

Source of original German text: *Vossische Zeitung* No. 382, August 13, 1924.

Translation: GHI staff

2. Republican Defense.

Berlin-West, August 14.

To the editor of the *Vossische Zeitung*.

In its morning edition of August 13, the *Vossische Zeitung* published a letter reporting on the defense of a woman returning home from the constitutional celebrations against an attack by the swastika wearers.

I confess that I am that energetic girl, and I feel obliged to take this opportunity to thank the correspondent for his entirely truthful and objective account. And I would like to take this opportunity to make a few comments to the public that I feel are necessary in view of such anti-republican harassment.

In my opinion, the republican camp pays far too little attention to the fact that, in general, bravery is indisputably the weakest point of the nationalists and monarchists. They are usually only strong and energetic in packs and large crowds. Individual opponents of the republic tend to be cowardly and weak. That they dare to engage in jostling and provocation is mostly due to the fact that they do not expect any resistance from the other side. The swastika wearer believes – especially in an environment that resembles a second-class train compartment bound for Wannsee station – that he will always find support and like-minded people.

But when faced with energetic resistance, the opponent will almost always back down. All republicans should learn from this real-life experience. A few examples may illustrate how republicans should defend themselves. Recently, an acquaintance of mine was riding on the roof of a bus, armed with a black, red, and gold [republican] flag. A young man stood up, he was a member of the *Jungdeutscher Orden*, adorned with the badge of the political sixth graders, the swastika. He saw the flag, turned around angrily, and prepared to spit on it, *sit venia verbo*. My source simply looked the young man firmly in the eye and gripped his walking stick more tightly. The attacker then swallowed the rest of his intended actions – he turned around in a flash and left the roof with hurried and visibly lively steps, jumping off the moving car in an instant. Heil!

And another one. A friend of mine, a member of the Republican War Veterans organization– which is close to the *Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold* – is traveling in a train compartment with some younger

gentlemen. They look at his uniform with astonishment and begin to murmur something about “*Ersatz Stahlhelm*,” “cardboard helmet,” and “straw helmet”; suddenly, one of them stands up and begins: “Dear fellow citizen, I see that you are a member of a Jewish organization. Let me give you a true German newspaper. Read it and learn where you belong as a good German”—and hands my friend the newspaper published by Knüppel-Kunze [Cudgel Kunze]. To which he replies with a serious expression: “Very kind of you.” He then reaches into his pocket, pulls out a newspaper clipping, and presses it into the astonished man’s loyal German hands. The recipients pore over the paper with curiosity—their faces grow longer and longer—eventually they get up and flee the compartment. They had been given the well-known report by the spa doctor Posener, in which he describes Kunze’s rescue from “distress at sea”...

Milly Zirker

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Translation: GHI staff

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