ON THE COVER
This fictional physician shares the creed of Francis Moore, M.D., "that assisting people to leave the dwelling place of their body when it is no longer habitable is becoming an obligation of the medical profession" (see page 46). Drawing by Susan Avishai.

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of the 697 names of Harvard’s World War II
death on the south wall in Memorial Church,
only Adolf Sannwald is designated “enemy
casualty.” “War Plaque Lists German Chap-
lain” ran the Crimson’s headline on
November 23, 1951, ten days after the formal unveiling
ceremony.
The paper had tracked down some biographical data: visiting
fellow at the Divinity School in 1924-25, pastor of a
Lutheran church in Stuttgart, inducted into the German
army in 1942, killed on the Russian front June 3, 1943, leav-
ing a wife and five children. An editorial three weeks later
declared, “Whatever Sannwald’s motives for fighting in
the Nazi cause, it is obvious he was not defending in any way
the principles that have nourished Harvard.” The Crimson’s
protests appeared to strike a nerve. On December 12, a
headline read, “University to Erase Name of German From
Memorial.” “The inclusion of the name of one alumnus
who served in the German army was an error,” the statement
from the University concluded. ‘It will be corrected.”

But the Harvard Corporation let the matter go. Although
the debate died in Cambridge, the story reached Germany
via The New York Times. From Württemberg, Sannwald’s
bishop wrote that his colleague “gave his life for the ideals
without which a university cannot exist.” Here is his story.

A mechanic’s son, Sannwald at 14 won a scholarship to
prepare for a career in theology, and was ordained a Lutheran
minister in 1923. In 1924 Harvard awarded him a one-year
scholarship. In Cambridge, he became good friends with a
Midwesterner named Martin Grabau, a graduate student in
physics; 20 years later, Grabau would propose Sannwald’s
name for inclusion on the Memorial Church plaque.

Harvard offered to extend Sannwald’s scholarship for
another year in 1925, but the Württemberg church, faced with
a shortage of young pastors, recalled him. After a few years’
teaching at the University of Tübingen, where he met and
married Anna von Schradow, he accepted a position as pastor
at St. Mark’s Church, Stuttgart, in 1930. He seemed set.

But social and political tensions were creating a tinderbox
in Germany. As early as 1931, Sannwald had angered local
National Socialists with one of his sermons. By 1933, Hitler
was ready to consolidate his hold on the Lutheran and evan-
gelical churches by fostering the “German Christian” move-
ment, whose members called for “a new Church of Christ in
the new state of Adolf Hitler.” In opposition stood the “Con-
fessing Church” of Karl Barth, Martin Niemoeller, Dietrich
Bonhoeffer, and hundreds of pastors like Sannwald. In 1934
he published a pamphlet, Why Not German Christians? “God
does not choose his children on the basis of race,” he wrote.
“We may not and will not confuse faith in Jesus Christ with
some other faith in a religious or political world view.”

That year, systematic harassment of both the Protestant
and Catholic churches began in earnest. “It is practically im-
possible to keep political police from infiltrating our parish
Councils,” Sannwald wrote his father. “Nobody knows the
future.” By 1935, church youth groups had been ordered to
become part of the Hitler Youth movement, and seminaries
were being shut down. That same year, Hitler reinstated
the draft. Sannwald was over-age, yet he volunteered any-
way. Along with other Confessing Church pastors, he under-
took basic military training out of “a sense of duty, a desire
to show his own honorable patriotism, and a determination that
Hitler not ‘own’ the army, too.

By 1936, Sannwald had been warned several times by the
Gestapo that his injudicious references would surely lead to
his arrest, so he accepted a call to Domhan, a tiny village in
the Black Mountains where his wife and young daughters
might be safer. Yet he stayed in touch with colleagues in the
Confessing Church, and his huge old rectory provided a
haven for fugitive Jews. “They just appeared for meals,” one
daughter remembered. “We were not allowed to know their
names, because we might be questioned by the authorities
and ‘Christian children don’t lie.’” In the late thirties, even
the trickle of refugees stopped. Although agents took notes
for the Gestapo in his country church, a parishioner recalled
that Sannwald “was always guided by his conscience in ex-
pressing himself unequivocally” about God’s will. He re-
peatedly pressed the local Nazi leader about rumors of de-
tainees being force-marched to Poland and disappearing.
The official reprisal came in January 1942. Drafted into the
Wehrmacht as a common soldier, he was on a troop train for
Russia within three days. Despite pleas from his parish
Council and fellow clergymen, he was never appointed a
chaplain; his Gestapo file noted his refusal to join the Party
and his support for the Confessing Church.

He served 18 months, mostly as cook’s helper, janitor, and
clerk. He was badly frostbitten and slightly wounded, won
a commendation for rescuing a comrade, had a single leave
home, and had one opportunity to preach to his fellow sol-
diers: his commander asked him to take part in an Easter
service. Sannwald chose as his theme the Resurrection and
“collective guilt.” A month later, he was killed in an air raid.

Sannwald died as a soldier in the army of a regime he de-
spised; he was indeed an “enemy casualty.” Seeing his name
in that sea of Allied names prevents us from skimming too
easily over the whole, even if we do not know, who he was,
or how he opposed Hitler. We are obliged to think about
the cost of that war on both sides, to think about living and
dying, of being a resister and being a soldier.

Joyce Palmer Ralph has spent the past year and a half tracking
down Adolf Sannwald’s story and his remaining family members.

Opposite: A snapshot of Sannwald taken at Harvard in 1925 and
(inset) a portrait taken in December 1942, on his one leave home.
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