

# What does Georg Elser's act of resistance against the Nazi regime tell us about the ability of ordinary people to resist?

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## 1. Introduction

In the 1980's and 1990's I had the chance to talk to members of my family about the time when Adolf Hitler was ruling Germany. For most of these people who were above 80 years of age it was for the first time that someone was asking them about their experiences – and what they personally did in this time. In the winter of their life, many of them took the chance and answered my questions - even when sometimes it seemed that they had the same unanswered questions about their acting therefore like I had.

40 or even 50 years after the downfall of Nazi-Germany these people had changed a lot. They had made up their own truths about the happenings and their actions – or their failure to act. Oral history is always very subjective, especially after so many decades.

When they told me their stories sooner or later they reached a point, where they admitted that there was a point in time from there on they knew that it would all have a bad end or even that they knew that unacceptable things were happening. For many, this was after the lost battle of Stalingrad, for others, it was already the beginning of the war. When asked "Why didn't you do anything against it?", they answered always very emotionally: "We didn't know what would come! It was not possible to resist! There was total control everywhere! You just had to say anything and they would have brought you immediately to the camps!"

It's true that the repression-machine of the Nazis was a large well-organised system of control.<sup>1</sup> It was supported by big parts of the population<sup>2</sup>, especially from the petit-bourgeoisie.<sup>3</sup> It's also true that sometimes a joke could already bring you into big troubles with the murderous system.<sup>4</sup> All this made the people think, that the Gestapo was omnipresent and that the police knew everything that was going on.<sup>5</sup> But does it also mean that there was no ability for ordinary people to resist at all?

To assess this question I will explore the person and the deeds of Georg Elser, who is still not much attended by historiography. From his example I'll explore if it would have really taken special knowledge to know about the things to come or if it would have taken special skills to resist against the Nazi-system.

## 2. Georg Elser and his deed

On 8<sup>th</sup> November 1939 at 9.20 pm, a bomb detonated in the public house "Bürgerbräukeller" in Munich, at the annual meeting of the "old fighters" of the national-socialist movement, reminiscing the Putsch-attempt of 1923.<sup>6</sup> Eight people were killed, 63 were injured, sixteen of them heavily.<sup>7</sup> It was clear that the aim of the assault was Adolf Hitler, the German dictator, who left the building 12 minutes

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<sup>1</sup> Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich in Power* (London: Penguin Books, 2005), pp. 81-118; Wolfgang Benz, *A Concise History of the Third Reich* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, University of California Press, 2006), pp. 113-120

<sup>2</sup> Evans, *Third Reich in Power*, pp. 100-101; Edward Crankshaw, *Gestapo – Instrument of Power* (New York, Di Capo Press, 1994), p. 94

<sup>3</sup> Evans, *Third Reich in Power*, pp. 435-441; Benz, *Concise History*, p. 89

<sup>4</sup> Evans, *Third Reich in Power*, p. 105

<sup>5</sup> Evans, *Third Reich in Power*, p. 103

<sup>6</sup> Wolfgang Benz, *Widersetzlichkeiten und Widerstand von einzelnen: Drei Beispiele* (1994); available from (12.04.2010): [http://www.bpb.de/publikationen/M1TSQJ.0.0.Widersetzlichkeit\\_und\\_Widerstand\\_von\\_einzelnen%3A\\_Drei\\_Beispiele.html#art2](http://www.bpb.de/publikationen/M1TSQJ.0.0.Widersetzlichkeit_und_Widerstand_von_einzelnen%3A_Drei_Beispiele.html#art2):

Lothar Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, in: *Widerstand im Dritten Reich*, ed. Hermann Graml (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1984), p. 183

<sup>7</sup> Anton Hoch and Lothar Gruchmann, *Georg Elser: Der Attentäter aus dem Volke – Der Anschlag auf Hitler im Münchener Bürgerbräu 1939*, (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1980), p. 42

earlier.<sup>8</sup> The perpetrator was caught fastly: Georg Elser, an artisan from Swabia (region in South-West-Germany), who prepared and accomplished the assault all by himself.<sup>9</sup> But the Nazi-elites were not satisfied with the results of the police investigation.<sup>10</sup> The very first reaction of Gestapo (Geheime Staatspolizei, "Secret State Police") -chief Müller was: "Well, but who's standing behind it?", and Heinrich Himmler, leader of the SS (Schutzstaffel, "Security Division") wrote furiously on the cover of the investigation file: "Which idiot has made this report?".<sup>11</sup> It seemed unbelievable to them, and also to most of the others, that a single man could endanger their reign so badly.<sup>12</sup>

## a. The person of Johann Georg Elser

### aa. Job history

Johann Georg Elser was born on the 4<sup>th</sup> January 1903 in Hermaringen in Swabia (Region in South-West-Germany).<sup>13</sup> Soon after his birth his family moved to the small village of Königsbronn.<sup>14</sup> Over there they had a small agricultural business, a farm and a small timber trade,<sup>15</sup> but they remained rather poor.<sup>16</sup> Elser went seven years to the Volksschule (public school), where he was an average pupil, but achieving good marks in drawing and maths.<sup>17</sup> After finishing school he started a carpenter-traineeship, which he finished in 1922 with best results.<sup>18</sup> Until 1925 he worked in several carpenter companies in his home region.<sup>19</sup> He never stayed for a long period of time with a company, which was caused partly by the economic situation, partly by the fact that he got into trouble with the foremen.<sup>20</sup>

In 1925 Elser went to the region around the city of Konstanz at the border to Switzerland.<sup>21</sup> Over there he worked until 1929 as a carpenter for a clock-producing company, which changed its name a few times.<sup>22</sup> In this clock-company he learnt the technical basics he used later on to construct a time fuse for his bomb.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Raik Dowedeit, *Georg Elser – Sonderweg des deutschen Widerstands* (Norderstedt: GRIN Verlag, 2005), p. 4; Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 183

<sup>9</sup> Benz, *Widersetzlichkeiten*; op.cit.

<sup>10</sup> Didier Chauvet, *Georg Elser et l'attentat du 8 novembre 1939 contre Hitler* (Paris: L'Harmattan 2009)

<sup>11</sup> Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 37

<sup>12</sup> Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 37

<sup>13</sup> Wolfgang Benz, *Widersetzlichkeiten*, op.cit.

Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 189

<sup>14</sup> Bundesarchiv Koblenz, *Akte Georg Elser, Signatur R 22/3100, Gestapo-Protokoll, 1. Tag, 19.11.1939*. Berlin, 1939; available from (12.04.2010):

<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer1.htm>;

Benz, *Widersetzlichkeiten*; op.cit.

<sup>15</sup> Bundesarchiv, *1. Tag*, available from (12.04.2010):

<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer1.htm>;

Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 19

<sup>16</sup> Bundesarchiv, *1. Tag*, available from (12.04.2010):

<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer1.htm>;

Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 19

<sup>17</sup> Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 19; Ulrich Renz, *Der mühsame Weg zum Ruhm – Georg Elser – lange vergessener und diffamierter Widerstandskämpfer*, in *Der vergessene Widerstand – Zu Realgeschichte und Wahrnehmung der NS-Diktatur*, ed. Johannes Tuchel (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag 2005), p. 161

<sup>18</sup> Bundesarchiv, *1. Tag*; available from (12.04.2010):

<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer1.htm>;

Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 184

<sup>19</sup> Benz, *Widersetzlichkeiten*; op.cit.

Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 19

<sup>20</sup> Bundesarchiv, *1. Tag*; available from (12.04.2010):

<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer1.htm>;

Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 20

<sup>21</sup> Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 21;

Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 183

<sup>22</sup> Bundesarchiv, *1. Tag*; available from (12.04.2010):

<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer1.htm>;

Benz, *Widersetzlichkeiten*; op.cit.

<sup>23</sup> Bundesarchiv, *1. Tag*; available from (12.04.2010):

<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer1.htm>;

Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 184

<sup>24</sup> Chauvet, *Georg Elser*, p. 25

Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 20

In the time after he had part-time jobs, amongst others at a clock-company called Rothmund.<sup>24</sup> When Rothmund became insolvent, they left him a few clockworks.<sup>25</sup> Two of them he used for his assault in 1939.<sup>26</sup>

In 1932 he returned to his home region.<sup>27</sup> Over there he lived with his parents again until 1939.<sup>28</sup> In their house he got a small garage, where he attended smaller remittance works.<sup>29</sup>

He also worked as a labourer at the instruments-factory Waldenmaier.<sup>30</sup> In 1938 he noticed that Waldenmaier had a special section, which produced ammunition, namely parts for grenades.<sup>31</sup>

## bb. Private life

Elser was a maverick.<sup>32</sup> He was known as being docile and helpful, but also as forward and bossy.<sup>33</sup> When he was so, he was very consequent and adamant, which meant that he lived within hostility towards large parts of his family at the end.<sup>34</sup>

He did not have real friends and he did not like to talk a lot.<sup>35</sup> For a long time he could sit at the table without saying something.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless he was popular,<sup>37</sup> especially among women, even when he never had a serious relationship to a woman.<sup>38</sup> In 1930, the waitress Mathilde Niedermann gave birth to his son Manfred.<sup>39</sup> Elser did not stay in touch with them a lot.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Bundesarchiv, 1. Tag; available from (12.04.2010):  
<http://www.georg-elsler-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer1.htm>;  
Schweizerisches Bundesarchiv Bern, *Akte Otto Strasser, Signatur E 4320 (B) 1970/25 Bd 1-4, Dossier C.2 102, Schweizer Ermittlungsbericht, 1. Februar 1940*. Bern, 1940; available from (12.04.2010):

<sup>25</sup> Bundesarchiv Koblenz, *Akte Georg Elser, Signatur R 22/3100, Gestapo-Protokoll 4. Tag, 22.11.1939*. Berlin, 1939; available from (12.04.2010):

<sup>26</sup> Bundesarchiv, 4. Tag; available from (12.04.2010):  
<http://www.georg-elsler-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer4.htm#rothmund2>

<sup>27</sup> Bundesarchiv Koblenz, *Akte Georg Elser, Signatur R22/3100, Gestapo-Protokoll 2. Tag, 20.11.1939*. Berlin, 1939; available from (12.04.2010):

<sup>28</sup> Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 20  
Bundesarchiv, 2. Tag; available from (12.04.2010):  
<http://www.georg-elsler-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer2.htm#meersburg3>;  
Schweizerisches Bundesarchiv Bern, *Ermittlungsbericht*, available from (12.04.2010):

<sup>29</sup> Bundesarchiv, 2. Tag; available from (12.04.2010):  
<http://www.georg-elsler-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer2.htm#koenigsbronn2>;  
Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 184

<sup>30</sup> Georg Elser, 2. Tag, available from (12.04.2010):  
<http://www.georg-elsler-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer2.htm#armaturen>;  
Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 20

<sup>31</sup> Georg Elser, 2. Tag, available from (12.04.2010):  
<http://www.georg-elsler-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer2.htm#armaturen>

<sup>32</sup> Benz, *Widersetzlichkeiten*; op.cit.;  
Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 21

<sup>33</sup> Georg-Elser-Arbeitskreis Heidenheim, *Interview mit Hans Elser* (1995); available from (12.04.2010):  
<http://www.georg-elsler-arbeitskreis.de/texts/hans-elsler.htm>;

<sup>34</sup> Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 21  
<sup>35</sup> Georg-Elser-Arbeitskreis Heidenheim, *Hans Elser: Gesprochen hat er nicht viel* (1995); available from (12.04.2010):  
<http://www.georg-elsler-arbeitskreis.de/texts/audio18.htm>;

<sup>36</sup> Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 21  
<sup>37</sup> Georg-Elser-Arbeitskreis Heidenheim, *Interview mit Hans Elser* (1995); available from (12.04.2010):  
<http://www.georg-elsler-arbeitskreis.de/texts/hans-elsler.htm>;

<sup>38</sup> Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 21  
Chauvet, *Georg Elser*, p. 27

<sup>39</sup> Georg Elser, *Gestapo Protokoll 2. Tag* (1939); available from (12.04.2010):  
<http://www.georg-elsler-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer2.htm#manfred>;  
Georg-Elser-Arbeitskreis Heidenheim, *Manfred Brühl: Ich habe ihn leider nicht gekannt* (1995); available from (12.04.2010):  
<http://www.georg-elsler-arbeitskreis.de/texts/audio16.htm>

<sup>40</sup> Bundesarchiv, 2. Tag; available from (12.04.2010):  
<http://www.georg-elsler-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer2.htm#manfred>  
Chauvet, *Georg Elser*, p. 27

Even if not talking a lot, Elser liked to be in company.<sup>41</sup> He liked to play in zither-clubs<sup>42</sup> and he was member in many associations, for example in the traditional costume association "Oberreintaler", a folklore society in Konstanz.<sup>43</sup>

## cc. Politics and Religion

Politically Elser belonged to the radical left. He was a member in the Holzarbeitergewerkschaft (Woodworker-Trade Union) because he thought that a worker should fight for his rights.<sup>44</sup> Before 1933 he voted for the Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (Communist Party of Germany, KPD) in the elections because he saw them as the party, which stood most for workers' rights.<sup>45</sup> He also was a member of the Roter Frontkämpferbund (Red Front Fighters Association, RFB), the street fight-organization of the KPD.<sup>46</sup> He said in his Gestapo-interrogation, that he was never an active member of the RFB and that he even wouldn't know anything about the ideology of communism.<sup>47</sup> But this should be taken carefully, because it's doubtful that he told the full truth to the Gestapo.<sup>48</sup> Anyway, being interrogated by a psychotherapist for his reasons of the attack he answered, that he did it, because he was a communist and that he wanted to prevent the war.<sup>49</sup>

The social-political situation that he observed he said in an interrogation were as follows. He said in the interrogation:

*For the working class the circumstances didn't improve but declined (after 1933). For example I asserted that the wages were getting lower, while the deductions raised...the hourly earnings of a carpenter was one Reichsmark in 1929, today it is 68 cents...*

Historians today agree with this analysis, that in contradiction to the propaganda of the Nazis the wages were falling while the deductions were rising.<sup>50</sup>

About the standing of the labourer he said:

*The working-class is standing under pressure today. The labourer can't change the job anymore, as he wants to, and because of the HJ (Hitlerjugend, "Hitler Youth") he isn't the master of his children anymore...*<sup>51</sup>

About the political situation and the danger of a war:

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<sup>41</sup> Peter Steinbach and Johannes Tuchel, *Der Mann, der es tat* (DIE ZEIT, No. 44, 1999), available from (12.04.2010): <http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/zeit1999-4445.htm>;

Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 21

<sup>42</sup> Georg-Elser-Arbeitskreis Heidenheim, *Hans Elser: Mitglied im Zitherclub* (1995), available from (12.04.2010):

<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/audio26.htm>

<sup>43</sup> Bundesarchiv, *Tag 2*, available from (12.04.2010):

<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer2.htm#trachten>;

Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 21

<sup>44</sup> Bundesarchiv, *Tag 2*, available from (12.04.2010):

<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer2.htm#politik>;

Benz, *Widersetzlichkeiten*; op.cit.

<sup>45</sup> Georg Elser, *Tag 2, 20*, available from (12.04.2010):

<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer2.htm#politik>;

Peter Steinbach and Johannes Tuchel, *Georg Elser und das Attentat des 8. November 1939*, in *Der 20. Juli 1944 und das Erbe des deutschen Widerstandes*, ed. Günter Brakelmann und Manfred Keller (Münster, LIT Verlag, 2005), p. 62

<sup>46</sup> Bundesarchiv, *Tag 2*, available from (12.04.2010):

<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer2.htm#politik>;

Benz, *Widersetzlichkeiten*; op.cit.

<sup>47</sup> Bundesarchiv, *Tag 2*, available from (12.04.2010):

<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer2.htm#politik>;

Benz, *Widersetzlichkeiten*; op.cit.

<sup>48</sup> Peter Koblanck, „Georg Elser und der Rote Frontkämpferbund“ (2009), available from (12.04.2010):

<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/rfb.htm>

<sup>49</sup> Oswald Bumke, *Es fehlte ihm nichts* in: Oswald Bumke, *Erinnerungen und Betrachtungen – der Weg eines deutschen Psychiaters* (München, 1952); available from (12.04.2010):

<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/bumke.htm>

<sup>50</sup> Evans, *Third Reich in Power*, pp. 478-480

<sup>51</sup> Bundesarchiv, *Tag 3*; available from (12.04.2010):

<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer3.htm#arbeiter>

*Already last year (1938) I came to the conclusion that it wouldn't been done with the Pact of Munich, but that Germany would address further allowances to other countries and would continue incorporating other countries. By this, a war was ineluctable...*<sup>52</sup>

By invading Poland in September 1939 the Nazis demonstrated that Elser was also right about that.

Elser was also a kind of Christian-religious.<sup>53</sup> In the interrogation he said:

*I believe that god has created this world and also the human life. I believe that there is nothing on earth, which god doesn't know about...<sup>54</sup>...I believe in life after death and I believed that I would go to heaven once...because I also wanted to anticipate a further bloodshed by my deed.*<sup>55</sup>

## b. The assault

In autumn 1938, Elser came to the opinion by his observations that a war would come and that it was time to resist.<sup>56</sup> The elimination of the Nazi-elite seemed a way to him to prevent a war, as also to improve the situation of the working-class man.<sup>57</sup> He never talked about his plans. Only one time he mentioned to a friend angrily in his hard Swabian accent:

*"We don't get no better time, no better future, before this government is blown up in the air. And I tell you, I will do it, I will."*<sup>58</sup>

When the Nazis celebrated their annual meeting in the "Bürgerbräukeller" at the 8<sup>th</sup> November 1938, Elser took part as a spectator.<sup>59</sup> He recognised the location as right for an assault and developed a plan to set a bomb in one of the stone pillar behind the lectern.<sup>60</sup>

At Waldenmaier he pilfered pressed gunpowder.<sup>61</sup> At the 4<sup>th</sup> April 1939 he travelled to Munich and took measurements of the pillar.<sup>62</sup> First he planned to get a job at the "Bürgerbräukeller" for doing preparations, but this plan failed.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Bundesarchiv, Tag 3; available from (12.04.2010):

<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer3.htm#krieg>

<sup>53</sup> Klemens von Klemperer, *Sie gingen ihren Weg in: Der Widerstand gegen den Nationalsozialismus*, ed. Jürgen Schmädke and Peter Steinbach (München: Piper, 1986), p. 1101

<sup>54</sup> Bundesarchiv Koblenz, *Akte Georg Elser, Signatur, R 22/3100, Gestapo- Protokoll Tag 3, 21.11.1939*. Berlin, 1939); available from (12.04.2010):

<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer3.htm#welt>

<sup>55</sup> Bundesarchiv, Tag 2; available from (12.04.2010):

<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer2.htm#blut>

<sup>56</sup> Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 23

Chauvet, *Georg Elser*, p. 39

<sup>57</sup> Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 23;

Georg-Elser-Arbeitskreis Heidenheim, *Jetzt hat's der Georg doch getan – Interview mit Eugen Rau* (Königsbronn1989); available from (12.04.2010):

<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/eugen-rau.htm>

<sup>58</sup> Georg-Elser-Arbeitskreis Heidenheim, *Jetzt hat's der Georg doch getan- Interview mit Eugen Rau* (Königsbronn 1989); available from:

<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/eugen-rau.htm>

<sup>59</sup> Bundesarchiv, Tag 3; available from (12.04.2010):

<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer3.htm#mu-1;>

Steinbach and Tuchel, *Der Mann, der es tat*, available from (12.04.2010):

<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/zeit1999-4445.htm>

<sup>60</sup> Bundesarchiv, Tag 3; available from (12.04.2010):

<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer3.htm#mu-1;>

Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, p. 111

<sup>61</sup> Bundesarchiv, Tag 3; available from (12.04.2010):

<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer3.htm#konkret;>

Steinbach and Tuchel, *Georg Elser*, p. 64

<sup>62</sup> Bundesarchiv, Tag 3; available from (12.04.2010):

<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer3.htm#mu-2;>

Steinbach and Tuchel, *Georg Elser*, p. 64

<sup>63</sup> Bundesarchiv, Tag 3; available from (12.04.2010):

<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer3.htm#mu-2;>

Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, p. 111

Middle of April 1939, Elser started working as a labourer in a stone pit near Königsbronn.<sup>64</sup> By doing this he got experiences in blasting.<sup>65</sup> From his job at the stone pit he pilfered detonators and explosive cartridges.<sup>66</sup>

After an accident gave him the chance to give up his job, he resolved the technical problems of the bomb in his garage.<sup>67</sup> At the end of July 1939 the construction plans were finished.<sup>68</sup>

On the 5<sup>th</sup> August 1939 he travelled to Munich and rented a room.<sup>69</sup> Every evening he went for dinner in the "Bürgerbräukeller".<sup>70</sup> He waited until the room emptied, then he hid into a closet.<sup>71</sup> He started working after 10pm, when the hall was closed and the staffs were gone, until 2am-3am.<sup>72</sup> After this he went back in his concealment and dozed until the Bürgerbräukeller opened again around 6am.<sup>73</sup> Around 6.30am he left the building through a side-door.<sup>74</sup> Nobody took notice of the inconspicuous man.<sup>75</sup>

He started the preparations with opening the wood boarding of the pillar and attached it to a door of 80cm x 80cm, invisible for people who didn't know about it.<sup>76</sup> For preventing nails damaging the clock-work, beaten in for decoration reasons, he set a 2mm strong iron sheet under this door.<sup>77</sup>

Then he broke out the bricks and the mortar.<sup>78</sup> He hid the tools in pieces of cloth to avoid noises.<sup>79</sup> The rubble fell directly into a back, which was clamped into the wall, so no dirt was left on the floor.<sup>80</sup> In the morning he took the rubble out in a little suitcase.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Bundesarchiv, Tag 3; available from (12.04.2010):  
<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer3.htm#vollmer1>;  
Rainer Erler, *Der Attentäter*, Süddeutscher Rundfunk, 1969. *Georg Vollmer: Georg Elser*; available from (12.04.2010):  
<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/gevideo22.htm>

<sup>65</sup> Georg Elser, Tag 3; available from (12.04.2010):  
<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer3.htm#vollmer1>;  
Dorle Butz, *Es hätte keinen Krieg geben müssen*, Schwäbische Post, 9.04.2005; available from (12.04.2010):  
<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/schwaepo20050409.htm>

<sup>66</sup> Bundesarchiv, Tag 3; available from (12.04.2010):  
<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer3.htm#vollmer2>  
Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 24

<sup>67</sup> Bundesarchiv, Tag 4; available from (12.04.2010):  
<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer4.htm#vollmer3>;  
Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 24

<sup>68</sup> Bundesarchiv, Tag 4; available from (12.04.2010):  
<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer4.htm#vollmer3>;  
Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 24

<sup>69</sup> Bundesarchiv, Tag 4; available from (12.04.2010):  
<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer4.htm#muenchen>;  
Georg-Elser-Arbeitskreis Heidenheim. *Rosa Lehmann: Hineinschauen kann man in keinen*.  
Munich, 1998.

<sup>70</sup> Bundesarchiv Koblenz, *Akte Georg Elser, R 22/3100, Gestapo Protokoll Tag 5, 23.11.1939*. Berlin 1939; available from (12.04.2010):  
<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer5.htm#einbau>;  
Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 26

<sup>71</sup> Bundesarchiv, Tag 5; available from (12.04.2010):  
<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer5.htm#einbau>;  
Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 187

<sup>72</sup> Bundesarchiv, Tag 5; available from (12.04.2010):  
<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer5.htm#einbau>;  
Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 26

<sup>73</sup> Bundesarchiv, Tag 5; available from (12.04.2010):  
<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer5.htm#einbau>  
Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 26

<sup>74</sup> Bundesarchiv, Tag 5; available from (12.04.2010):  
<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer5.htm#einbau>;  
Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 26

<sup>75</sup> Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 26  
<sup>76</sup> Bundesarchiv, Tag 5; available from (12.04.2010):  
<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer5.htm#einbau>;  
Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 26

<sup>77</sup> Bundesarchiv, Tag 5; available from (12.04.2010):  
<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer5.htm#einbau>;  
Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 26

<sup>78</sup> Bundesarchiv, Tag 5; available from (12.04.2010):  
<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer5.htm#einbau>;  
Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 26

<sup>79</sup> Bundesarchiv, Tag 5; available from (12.04.2010):

Thus he worked in such a manner 30-35 days.<sup>82</sup> There were times when he was trapped during his preparations, but he always had a good excuse for being in the hall.<sup>83</sup> Other artisans produced small details for his bomb without knowing what they were good for.<sup>84</sup> In the night 5<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> November 1939 he finally put the bomb into the pillar.<sup>85</sup> After this he left to Stuttgart to his sister, where he stayed on night, before returning to Munich to activate the time fuse, which was equipped with two clockworks for ensuring that the bomb would explode at the desired time.<sup>86</sup> At the 8<sup>th</sup> November 1938 he left to Konstanz, where he wanted to cross the border to Switzerland.<sup>87</sup>

The bomb was not found in its concealment as a result of conflicts of competence between the NSDAP (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei, National Socialist German Workers Party) and the police.<sup>88</sup> Hitler had said: "In this hall my old fighters protect me." The "old fighters", however, could not find the bomb.<sup>89</sup>

At the 8<sup>th</sup> November 1939 Hitler arrived in the Bürgerbräukeller at 8pm.<sup>90</sup> He stepped at the lectern and started his speech at 8.10 pm.<sup>91</sup> Propaganda-Minister Goebbels was closed to him, while the bomb was ticking just a few meters away in the pillar.<sup>92</sup> But Hitler wanted to be back in Berlin the next morning.<sup>93</sup> The weather was foggy, so Hitler could not take the airplane, hence he had to take the train.<sup>94</sup> This caused an unusual short speech.<sup>95</sup> Hitler and Goebbels left the hall at 9.07 pm. The bomb exploded at 9.20 pm, exactly at the time, when Elser wanted it to.<sup>96</sup>

Meanwhile, 8.30 pm, Elser headed towards the Swiss-German border.<sup>97</sup> He had checked the border station before and normally the guards were on patrol at this time.<sup>98</sup> But today they were inside the station for listening to Hitlers' speech in the radio.<sup>99</sup> One of them saw Elser and thought that he was

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- <http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer5.htm#einbau>;  
Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 27
- <sup>80</sup> Bundesarchiv, *Tag 5*; available from (12.04.2010):  
<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer5.htm#einbau>;  
Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 27
- <sup>81</sup> Bundesarchiv, *Tag 5*; available from (12.04.2010):  
<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer5.htm#einbau>;  
Benz, *Widersetzlichkeiten*; op.cit.
- <sup>82</sup> Bundesarchiv, *Tag 5*; available from (12.04.2010):  
<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer5.htm#einbau>;  
Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 27
- <sup>83</sup> Bundesarchiv, *Tag 5*; available from (12.04.2010):  
<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer5.htm#einbau>;  
Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 27
- <sup>84</sup> Bundesarchiv, *Tag 5*; available from (12.04.2010):  
<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer5.htm#solleder>;  
Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 27
- <sup>85</sup> Bundesarchiv, *Tag 5*; available from (12.04.2010):  
<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer5.htm#fertig>;  
Chauvet, *Georg Elser*, p. 45
- <sup>86</sup> Bundesarchiv, *Tag 1*; available from (12.04.2010):  
<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer1.htm#39-11-06>;  
Bundesarchiv, *Tag 5*; available from (12.04.2010):  
<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer5.htm#muench3>
- <sup>87</sup> Bundesarchiv, *Tag 5*; available from (12.04.2010):  
<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer5.htm#friedrichsh>;  
Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 32
- <sup>88</sup> Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 32
- <sup>89</sup> Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 32
- <sup>90</sup> Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 34
- <sup>91</sup> Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 35
- <sup>92</sup> Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 35
- <sup>93</sup> Peter Hoffmann, *German Resistance to Hitler* (Harvard, Harvard Press, 1988), p. 107;  
Benz, *Widersetzlichkeiten*; op.cit.
- <sup>94</sup> Hoffmann, *Resistance*, p. 107  
Benz, *Widersetzlichkeiten*; op.cit.
- <sup>95</sup> Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 35
- <sup>96</sup> Steinbach and Tuchel, *Georg Elser*, p. 65  
Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 35  
Chauvet, *Georg Elser*, p. 21
- <sup>97</sup> Bundesarchiv, *Tag 5*; available from (12.04.2010):  
<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer5.htm#verhaft>;  
Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 35
- <sup>98</sup> Bundesarchiv, *Tag 5*; available from (12.04.2010):  
<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer5.htm#friedrichsh>;  
Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 35
- <sup>99</sup> Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 35

behaving nervously.<sup>100</sup> They stopped and checked him.<sup>101</sup> They found an emblem of the RFB under the collar of his jacket and in his bag they found detonators and a postcard showing the Bürgerbräukeller.<sup>102</sup> Maybe Elser took it with him as a souvenir,<sup>103</sup> maybe he just forgot about it as he said during the interrogation.<sup>104</sup> Nonetheless it was enough for the customs officer to arrest him at 8.45pm.<sup>105</sup> Later that day he was given to the police.<sup>106</sup> In the night 13<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> November 1939 he confessed.<sup>107</sup>

### c. The end

After the interrogation by the Gestapo Elser was brought to the concentration camps of Sachsenhausen and Dachau.<sup>108</sup> Over there he was a "personal prisoner of the leader", which meant that he was not so badly treated like the other prisoners.<sup>109</sup> The Nazis had the plan to do a big show trial after the "Endsieg" (final victory), and for this Elser should stay alive.<sup>110</sup>

But there was no "Endsieg" for Hitler. Instead of this the Red Army stopped the advance of the Wehrmacht in Stalingrad in February 1943, and the western Allies landed in the Normandy on 6th June 1944. Step by step the Nazi-army was forced backwards, until the Allies finally invaded the German Empire.

A few days before the U.S Army liberated the concentration camp of Dachau, order was given to execute Georg Elser.<sup>111</sup> The SS-Oberscharführer (Sergeant-rank of the SS) Theodor Bongartz killed him with a shot in the neck.<sup>112</sup> Georg Elser died on the 9<sup>th</sup> April 1945 around 11 pm.<sup>113</sup> He was 42 years old.

Elser's potential victim, Adolf Hitler, survived Elser just by three weeks. On the 29<sup>th</sup> April 1945, facing defeat, he committed suicide in his bunker in Berlin.<sup>114</sup>

Elser's murderer, the SS-Oberscharführer Theodor Bongartz died in American war captivity on 15<sup>th</sup> may 1945.<sup>115</sup>

## 3. Résumé

Georg Elser was an ordinary man just like everyone else – but he also was not.

His skills were not extraordinary. He was a carpenter and he liked working with technical sophisticated machines (clockworks). In his work he was very talented and very precise, a perfectionists in fact<sup>116</sup> – but this is how many artisans work, especially in Germany.

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<sup>100</sup> Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 35

<sup>101</sup> Bundesarchiv, *Tag 5*; available from (12.04.2010): <http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer5.htm#verhaft>;

Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 35

<sup>102</sup> Benz, *Widerstzlichkeiten*; op.cit.

Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 187

<sup>103</sup> Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 187

<sup>104</sup> Bundesarchiv, *Tag 5*; available from (12.04.2010):

<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/geverhoer5.htm#verhaft>;

<sup>105</sup> Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 36

Chauvet, *Georg Elser*, p. 50

<sup>106</sup> Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 36

<sup>107</sup> Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 36

<sup>108</sup> Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 188

Chauvet, *Georg Elser*, p. 59

<sup>109</sup> Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p.188

Chauvet, *Georg Elser*, p. 59

<sup>110</sup> Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 189

<sup>111</sup> Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 37

<sup>112</sup> Hellmut G. Haasis, *Den Hitler jag' ich in die Luft*, (Berlin: Rowolth, 1990), p. 238

<sup>113</sup> Haasis, op.cit., p. 238

<sup>114</sup> Evans, *Third Reich at War*, p. 726;

Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich – A New History*, (New York, Hill and Wang, 2000), p. 792

<sup>115</sup> Haasis, op.cit, 239

<sup>116</sup> Rainer Erler, *Der Attentäter*, (Süddeutscher Rundfunk, 1969), *Friedrich Grupp: Georg Elser*, available from (12.04.2010): <http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/gevideo23.htm>

He had no special education. The way he learnt working with explosives was opened to everyone. The way he looked for a good spot to eliminate the Nazi-elite was also accessible for everybody. That it is possible to kill a dictator with a bomb should be also well known in Germany 1939.

As far as we know, Elser had no help from nobody. He was not a member of a group, but a single fighter. With his average skills, he worked it out all by himself.

He had no special skills of anticipating a war. He was just able (and brave enough) to put two and two together. Millions of Germans heard the aggressive propaganda of the Nazis, as also millions of them had to work in the ammunition-production in the years before the war.<sup>117</sup>

By these facts we can assess the threat of a further war as being anticipatable for everybody in Germany 1939.

So Elser had no special knowledge and no special skills that the ordinary Germans wouldn't have had in this time. Therefore we can assess the ability for ordinary people to resist against the system as being given by objective parameters.

But the special thing about Elser was that he had a strong pronounced feeling for justice,<sup>118</sup> probably coming from his protestant background and maybe deposited in his political attitude. He cared about the rights of the individual a lot, as it's also seen in his reasons for rejecting the Nazi-government.<sup>119</sup> So he was compassionated in a time, when many became opportunists, and this became his fate.

Also he was special in his personality, which was almost post-modern:  
He was a communist – and also a member of very traditional folklore clubs.  
He believed in God – but not that much that he thought that God would eliminate Hitler by himself.  
He didn't like to talk a lot – but liked being in company as we can see by his cultural activities.

So we can assess him as being individual without being individualistic. By this he developed own thoughts, which were not just about him. He was consistent in his thinking and acting. This gave him the subjective ability to resist.

On the other side, the ordinary Germans missed this subjective ability at this time. Even when they didn't follow Hitler, many of them were opportunists. They didn't want to see what would happen until it was too late. In case they did see before, they were afraid of taking out the consequences, because they could face troubles then. The evidence for this is also that they didn't act like Elser.

That it was objectively possible to anyone to resist shows the deed and the person of Georg Elser. So in fact, it wasn't the Gestapo, who stopped the ordinary Germans from resisting – but themselves.

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<sup>117</sup> Evans, *The Third Reich in Power*, p. 481

<sup>118</sup> Georg-Elser-Arbeitskreis Heidenheim, *Jetzt hat's der Georg doch getan - Interview mit Eugen Rau*, Königsbrunn, 1989  
<http://www.georg-elser-arbeitskreis.de/texts/eugen-rau.htm>

<sup>119</sup> Hoch and Gruchmann, *Georg Elser*, p. 23

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