

In reading the pre-World War II portion of the memoir of Johannes Aanderaa, a Norwegian Lutheran pastor who died in 1974, I paid close attention to his trip through Europe in 1938. He ended that sabbatical journey in Germany just prior to the outbreak of war. Among the many people he visited on that trip was an old minister named Niemöller whose son was in prison for opposition to the way Adolf Hitler was treating Jews. Frau Niemöller was very worried about her son in prison—he was there during all the war years—but the father was in a better frame of mind concerning the fate of the son. Aanderaa described it like this: “He had seen so many examples that God heard prayers and that injustice eventually came to an end that he believed God would take care of this, too.” Aanderaa himself agreed, but wrote: “He was right, but there were many years to wait.”

The son of the old Niemöller was Martin Niemöller. Although his father was not a well-known person, Martin Niemöller’s famous quotation has been repeated over and over since he uttered the words after the end of World War II. He was the former Nazi sympathizer who eventually turned against Hitler and his policies, and after the war said: “First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.” From 1937 through the end of the war in 1945, Martin Niemöller was in prison.

They came for the immigrants, but I am not an immigrant, and I did not speak out. Think about that.