

From Fire Watcher to Relief Worker

Hugh Maw (Stourbridge Quaker Meeting)

My father was a missionary in India where I was born. He was a Conscientious Objector (C.O.) in the Great War (World War I). While I was a teenager we had a succession of three German 'au-pair' girls to help in the family. We were a Quaker family living in Selly Oak, Birmingham.

As soon as conscription began, my two older brothers and I were expecting to be called up into the armed forces. So there were decisions to be made. War was declared against Germany exactly a year later after I started training as a teacher at Bristol University.

My oldest brother decided he would apply for a commission in the army and became a major in the catering corps. He served all through the war. To start with he was in Europe. He escaped with this life after the evacuation of Dunkirk. Then he served in the Middle East, North Africa and Italy until he was "demobbed".

My other brother, as soon as he had qualified as a doctor, joined the Royal Army Medical Corps as a Captain. Eventually he was wounded and came back to England. He also served in Europe.

When I was called up in 1940 I registered as a C.O. because I could not contemplate fighting and training to kill the "enemy"—the Germans. It seemed totally against the teaching of the Bible, especially the New Testament. We respected each other's decisions.

Fire-Watching in Bristol

By this time the German air raids on Bristol had begun. I volunteered to take on air raid duties and fire-watching on the roof tops of some of the University buildings from which I had an amazing view.

The first raid was the worst. The whole of Bristol seemed to be going up in flames. The noise and smoke and smell were awful. I managed to put out some small fires from incendiary bombs (fortunately some were duds) and dodged the shrapnel whizzing about from the anti-aircraft guns.

After the raid, when the beautiful University Great Hall (and organ) were gutted, I found part of the Medical School next to the Biology Department was wrecked. The raiders returned and soon I was asked to go down to the big hospital to act as a stretcher bearer and theatre orderly to help with the casualties, a horrible sight.

The Tribunal—Choosing to be a Conscientious Objector:

Then came my tribunal. I was dreading the day. The judge and his two assistants heard my statement and then asked me some searching questions such as, "If a German soldier attacked your mother or your girl friend what would you do—turn the other cheek?"

I was expecting to be sent either to prison or to be given some alternative service such as farming or forestry, but to my surprise I was given complete exemption from military service and recommended to finish my teacher training. I was set free.

Searching for Enemy Beetles

So I continued with my fire fighting duties and was up many nights when there were air raid warnings. During the holidays I volunteered to do other jobs. One was with the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, systematically searching potato fields in Devon and Cornwall for Colorado Beetles, supposed to have been dropped by German pilots to ruin our basic food supplies. For this I was arrested one day as a German spy by soldiers from a Plymouth Searchlight post, but I escaped when I found my identity papers and ministry passes.

Working in a Hostel for Jewish Refugees

The real test of my conscience came, however, when I was one of three C.O.s helping in a Quaker Hostel near Brecon for the wives and children of Austrian Jewish refugees whose husbands had been interned in a military camp in Southampton.

Whenever an air-raid siren went off, ten or fifteen minutes later the hostel would be surrounded by armed soldiers with fixed bayonets from Brecon barracks. All of us would be herded into the common room and in would march the Brigadier with a loaded pistol shouting, "If any German parachutists land in this area you will all be shot, including you three b... chonchies."

This terrified the children especially, because at the same time we knew the whole building was being searched, but we did not know what they were looking for.

This happened frequently, but gradually the atmosphere relaxed. No German parachutists landed and nothing was found during the searches. The Brigadier stopped coming and the soldiers became our friends. They bought some of our farm and garden produce including honey and brought us some needed supplies. Eventually they stopped coming and just gave us a telephone call to ask if we were alright.

The Friends' Relief Service: Helping civilians in Berlin after the war

As soon as the war was over, I volunteered to join the Friends' Relief Service because I wanted to help clear up some of the mess in Europe. After three months training I was posted to Berlin to do relief work with the Red Cross under the British Military government. It was during the terrible cold winter of 1946/47. My job was to make a report on the welfare of all the young and homeless people who had been put into the prisons for such crimes as stealing food or coal or cigarettes to barter with.

One day a Military Government officer's wife turned up at our Headquarters and asked if she could help in any way with our relief work. It turned out to be the wife of the Brecon Brigadier. He too had been posted to Berlin after the war was over and was responsible for arranging the Potsdam Conference when Churchill, Stalin and Roosevelt met for summit talks. The Brigadier recognised and remembered me. "What a coincidence," he said with a wry smile. "So we are still both working for peace in our different ways, I see." His wife helped us distribute medical supplies and clothes for refugees and food parcels from Britain where there was still food rationing as well as from America.

Some of the parcels came from Bournville, both the village and the schools. The children had included some of their chocolate rations. Some of them started to exchange friendly letters and this helped their language classes. I also managed to contact all three of our German "au-pair" girls who survived the war and gave me a warm welcome.