



Profiles

of Mennonite Faith

Mennonite conscientious objectors (COs) during World War Two

We had just come from visiting my grandfather and I now stood in the park next to a newly built memorial wall in Winkler, Manitoba. The wall was in an arc about 40 feet long and 4 feet high.

“What is this wall doing here?” my ten-year-old son asked. I took my son, perched him on top of the wall and looked him in the eye. “This is a special wall,” I said. “It is made of 3,021 bricks, one for each Manitoba conscientious objector [CO], including your great-grandpa. As a young man, he had a very important decision to make. The country asked him to go to war, but he believed God was telling him not to go.”

This was the situation that thousands faced as the US and Canada became involved in WWII. Each nation turned to their young men and women to defend national interests. The communities in the historic peace church tradition (Mennonites, Quakers, Brethren in Christ, Hutterites) were faced with a difficult decision: continue following the admonition of Jesus to love all people, even enemies, or follow the directives of political leaders, intent on advocating national interests. Frank C. Peters, Canadian

Mennonite Brethren church leader, chose to register as a CO. He said, “From the beginning to the end of his life, Jesus grappled with the problem of force . . . I can come to no other conclusions than that Jesus was the first Christian pacifist.”

Canada and the United States have long histories, reaching back to colonial days, of making provisions for people who cannot “take up arms” on the basis of conscience. Given this history, Mennonites met to discuss a response to the escalating conflict. Some believed the government should honor earlier promises and allow full exemption of all Mennonites from military service. Others believed the historic peace churches should offer other, non-military service to their countries. Delegations were sent to Ottawa and Washington.

At one of the meetings in 1940, a Canadian general and war veteran asked the Mennonite-led delegation: “What will you do if we shoot you?” Jacob H. Janzen of Ontario, who had survived several desperate situations in the Soviet Union, replied: “You can’t scare us like that. I’ve looked down too many rifle bar-



WWII COs building road in Jasper (Alberta) national park. CMBS, Winnipeg. John M. Schmidt collection.

rels in my time to be scared in that way. This thing is in our blood for 400 years and you can't take it away from us like you'd crack a piece of kindling over your knee. I was before a firing squad twice. We believe in this."

In the United States, delegations made proposals to President Roosevelt in 1935 and again in 1940, which led to a bill that defined COs and established the Civilian Public Service (CPS) as an alternative to military service. In both countries, men opting for alternative service were individually assessed, opening CO status to all citizens. Most men appeared before a judge who decided on their commitment to non-violence. In Canada, judges hearing CO cases varied in their opinion of COs. Judges in Saskatchewan and Manitoba personally saw their duty as diverting as many men as possible from claiming CO status. In the end, almost 11,000 Canadians from 33 cultural backgrounds and almost 12,000 Americans from 231 religious denominations served as COs during WWII.

The choice to opt for CO status resulted in strained relationships. In Alberta, two Mennonite churches were burned to the ground on the same day in 1940. In Ontario, a minister's house was searched by police, and a church was ransacked. In Oklahoma, a house was egged and the church was used for target practice by a sniper. Like a "fugitive in society, all propaganda, radio, press, billboards pointed a finger at you—why are you not in the army doing your duty?"

When CO status was granted, the young men served in various roles. Some volunteered for medical experiments. Others worked in the forestry service, firefighting and tree-planting. On Vancouver Island, COs planted 17 million trees. In the medical

corps, they tended to the medical needs of military personnel. COs served in hospitals and institutions for the mentally ill, helping care for some of the most vulnerable in society. Others worked in national parks or on farms producing food for the country.

While these activities were of valuable service to the country, the impact of the CO experience lasted much longer than the war. The CO work camps enabled men to make friendships across ethnic and denominational lines, building trust and reducing barriers. They gained new skills. Marvin Hein, American Mennonite Brethren church leader, said, "I shall never be sorry I spent those years in CPS. Much of what I am today is a result of those 33 months in CPS."

After WWII, many COs continued a life of service to others as teachers, doctors, nurses, and pastors. The CO experience paved the way for a new era of cooperation among the various Mennonite denominations through the work of Mennonite Central Committee, Mennonite Voluntary Service, and Mennonite Disaster Service.

While COs were at times ridiculed, their role in mental health care especially has over time softened these attitudes. In 2011, at that same park in Winkler, a veterans' memorial was also dedicated. Brian Minnaker spoke of his father's experience: "Dad was a D-Day Veteran . . . he had choice words for COs. 'How could the God of justice possibly be with the likes of them?' That was his opinion until some of his buddies began to have mental troubles . . . Dad would realize that, yes, God was truly with the group of people that gave up so much to improve the medical and psychiatric care in our country."



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