

Conscientious Objection Changed My Life

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Growing up in a Church of the Brethren family, it was natural for me to be in accord with the teachings of the “historic peace churches” (Society of Friends, Mennonites, and Church of the Brethren), regarding participation in military activity. At the age of 18 I followed United States law by registering with Selective Service—as a conscientious objector.

In 1954 I joined Brethren Volunteer Service, approved by the United States Government as qualified service in the “national interest” as an alternative to military service. After a half year of serving as a “human guinea pig at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland, and the Metabolic Unit of the University of Michigan Hospital in Ann Arbor, I was assigned to Heifer Project in Germany.

We distributed bred heifers to families who had lost everything in Eastern Europe and were trying to renew their lives in Western Germany. These animals were contributed by individuals, congregations, Sunday School and Bible School classes, service clubs, etc. in the United States. Many stories could be told about the reactions of the recipient families, whose only obligation was to “pass on the gift” by donating the first-born female calf to an approved worthy refugee recipient. These reactions could be summarized by the statement of one recipient, “It surely takes a lot of love to give a cow away.”

A far reaching reaction can be realized by reading the attached article of Church of the Brethren publication, *GospelMessenger* (March 10, 1956) [insert the hyperlink to the article].

Reacting to the influx of thousands of refugees into little Austria during the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, I was transferred to Austria. I was responsible for coordinating the work of Brethren volunteers in the various refugee camps in Upper Austria. Unique occurrences led me to chauffeuring a professor of the Baptist Seminary in Budapest to the various refugee camps in Austria, holding Christmas services in the Hungarian language.

My final area of service during my three years of alternative service as a conscientious objector was to purchase land on the island of Sardinia, Italy, with funds provided by the American motion picture star, Don Murray (co-starred with Marilyn Monroe in “Bus Stop” and Eva Marie Saint (“Hatful of Rain”). Murray had served as a Conscientious Objector in the slums of Naples, and he chose the refugees from central Europe who accompanied me to begin a new life in Sardinia.

As a youth I firmly saw no other future than to be as my father, grandfather, and other ancestors: a farmer. Becoming a conscientious objector exposed me, a naïve farm boy, to activities, domestic and international, that changed my life. I enrolled as a college student, continued to a doctorate and 35-year professorship at a liberal arts college.