

FRIENDS INTERNATIONAL CENTRES IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

The idea to start up a Quaker Centre in Norway has been under consideration in Norway Yearly Meeting for several years, and has taken several large steps forward with the naming this year of a committee to launch a Centre and the recent move to larger, more flexible space for Friends' activities in Oslo. It could be interesting in that context to look back at an earlier phase of Quaker Centres, from the first half of the twentieth century.

The concept of Quaker Centres gained currency after the First World War, when Friends had been drawn into putting their ideals and their lives on the line as pacifists in war relief work and were moved in the aftermath to establish a more permanent presence for peace. This took the form of "Quaker embassies", later called Friends International Centres, which were started up in the major cities of Europe and gradually around the world beginning in the early 1920s. The Centres were charged to provide a "Quaker presence" and to generate dialogue within local civic and diplomatic communities on outstanding issues of peace and war.

Through the Centres, a format of off-the-record meetings for policy- and decision-makers developed; a practical approach to peace-building that incorporated Quaker tenets on giving a voice to all, on searching for a larger common truth, and on addressing the individual behind the title.

Quaker Embassies /Friends Centres; 1920-1951

Following the fragile close of the First World War and the establishment of the League of Nations, Friends were interested to have direct engagement in the way peace was perceived and discussed in Europe (still seen as the powder keg) and beyond, particularly in Asia. It was London Yearly Meeting that formulated the idea of "Quaker embassies" to be set up in major cities of Europe, though British Friends were soon joined and supported by Yearly Meetings in Ireland and North America (both USA and Canada) and by the American Friends Service Committee, which had been established as an independent Quaker agency during the war. Between 1920 and 1950 Friends International Centres operated in Frankfurt, Berlin, Nuremberg, Paris, Nice, Geneva, Vienna, Warsaw,

Moscow, Copenhagen, Oslo, London, Amsterdam, Rome, Washington D.C., Salonika (Greece), Calcutta, Delhi, Shanghai, and Kingston (Jamaica).

In drawing groups from the local community together to discuss critical issues, participants were often chosen from diplomatic and national policy-making ranks, mixed to serve the Centres' primary purpose of reconciliation. London Yearly Meeting's proceedings from 1920 describe reports of "Gatherings for discussion ... in which vital questions are talked out in freedom". It proved an inventive and pragmatic model for peace work.

In Geneva, several of the Centre's long-term projects included the convening of a regular forum for representatives of the nearly fifty international organizations with headquarters there, a function that in time became an official inter-agency body that continues to this day. Also, besides constant monitoring of the League of Nations for Friends, the office provided a press service (run by Bertram Pickard) for some forty newspapers in the United States and Great Britain. Besides weekly lectures and informal discussions on the current issues for international service staff, in 1924-'25 the Centre hosted a regular dialogue programme including specialists and diplomats around negotiations on the Convention on Control of the International Trade in Arms, Munitions and Implements of War. Though this convention to control the arms trade failed, the negotiations did produce and adopt the important 1925 protocol against the use of poisonous gases in war. This protocol continues to provide an anchor for control of chemical weapons. The Geneva Friends Centre received a special commendation from the League for this supportive engagement.¹

The Friends Centres also collaborated in providing an International Seminar Programme for diplomats, exemplified by a series of conferences in the late 1920s with representatives from Germany and Poland, supported by the Berlin and Warsaw Centres.

From 1933, Quaker diplomatic and humanitarian efforts turned increasingly to succouring Jews and other victims of Nazi oppression. Travelling in 1935, Rufus Jones, clerk of AFSC's Board of Directors, reported back to London and Philadelphia that the Centres were "...like islands of light in a surrounding sea of darkness". The worst years of global economic depression and the Second World War severely curtailed activities of Friends International Centres, but they were revitalized and even expanded following 1946.

During and following World War II, Friends' service agencies unfolded a new chapter of humanitarian work, developing approaches for refugee and relief aid, and providing a model of

commitment (underlined by Gunnar Jahn in his Nobel presentation speech), for which they were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1947.² But Friends had begun to work with the clay of international relations and in that medium they were to make a distinctive mark in the second half of the century through the Quaker United Nations Offices and the Quaker International Affairs Representatives in troubled regions of the world.

Accomplishments of the Friends International Centres

In taking stock following World War II of what they had learned in their International endeavours since 1920, Friends saw that the network of International Centres in the major cities of Europe and in Asia had accomplished several things.

The Centres had attracted and nourished new groups of seekers, who in their turn had founded their own national branches of the Religious Society of Friends. Looking back in 1951, London Yearly Meeting proceedings note that "...in 1914 there were probably only three active meetings for worship on the continent: Stavanger, Copenhagen and Paris. By 1951 there are thirty to forty in Germany alone and several each in France, Switzerland, Holland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark, and individual meetings in Helsinki, Vienna and Rome."

And through the work of the Centres, Friends had made contacts widely across the national and international communities of policy makers. They had discovered that they had a certain handle, an approach that brought people together to discuss off-the-record and in their personal capacities, important issues of the day. This approach worked both with neighbours from the community around the Centres³ and with diplomats and national policy makers.

Noting the report of an inter-agency review of the Centres held in 1949, London Yearly Meeting's proceedings of that year underline their peace mission: "A Centre is not only a certain programme carried on between four walls. The influence of a Centre should be felt far beyond the building that houses it, and the Centre workers must be free to reach out into wider spheres of influence or activity. Personal service, helping people to face their problems not only with new courage, but in a new light; and service of reconciliation, are key notes of Centre work."

After 1950 the Quaker Centres, other than Geneva and New York, came increasingly under the responsibility of their own national groups, and the focus of Friends international work expanded and became more professionalized. In 1951 London Yearly Meeting reported spending £62,000 on the Centres and £86,000 on relief in the

previous year. "Friends role and work with relief and refugees has ballooned...we have ambassadors at large in war zones everywhere".

The Centres served an important bridging role during three of the most challenging decades of the 20th century: connecting Friends peace witness to practical applications, and connecting policy makers across troubled regions through a network of innovative thinking and support for peace.

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FOOTNOTES

- 1.) Over twenty years later, the Paris Centre served a similar supportive function for negotiators of the Genocide Convention. And in 1948, on the evening when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights had finally been adopted by its drafting committee meeting in Paris, Eleanor Roosevelt dropped by the Friends Centre to celebrate and to thank Friends for the support their international affairs work had given to making the Declaration possible.
- 2.) Gunnar Jahn, chairman of the Norwegian Nobel Peace Prize committee (also at this time director of the Bank of Norway), closed his presentation speech on December 10, 1947 by saying: "The Quakers have shown us that it is possible to translate into action what lies deep in the hearts of many: compassion for others and the desire to help them -that rich expression of the sympathy between all men, regardless of nationality or race, which, transformed into deeds, must form the basis for lasting peace. For this reason alone the Quakers deserve to receive the Nobel Prize today.

But they have given us something more: they have shown us the strength to be derived from faith in the victory of the spirit over force. And this brings to mind two verses from one of Arnulf Øverland's poems which helped so many of us during the war. I know of no better salute:

*The unarmed only
can draw on sources eternal.
The spirit alone gives victory".*

- 3.) "A large student club which met regularly in the Vienna Centre represented all religious and political persuasions - Jewish, Protestant, Catholic; and Christian Socialist, Social Democrat, and German Nationalist. This did not seem especially

noteworthy until one learned how intense were the antagonisms being bridged. I was told that nowhere else in Vienna could such a fellowship develop". From Clarence Pickett's autobiography, *For More than Bread*, p.90