

CORDER CATCHPOOL (1883-1952): A LIFE BETWEEN ENGLAND AND GERMANY

Thomas Corder Pettifor Catchpool, born on the 15th of July 1883 in Leicester, was the second of seven children born to Thomas Kingham Catchpool and Florence Pettifor.¹ When he was twelve years old his family moved to Guernsey, where he attended Guernsey High School and later, aged fifteen years, he was transferred to Sidcot School (Somerset), the Quaker School. After two years there he moved to Bootham School in York, also run by Quakers. His school years were not easy for him, although thanks to his outstanding ability in football, he won respect and recognition among his fellow pupils.

Corder's Quaker education anchored him firmly in pacifism. His consideration of a career was, at the age of nineteen, influenced by his wish to serve his fellow men. Owing to his modest financial circumstances, he was unable to study medicine and so decided on an engineering career. In 1902 he began a six year apprenticeship with James Holton, a London railway engineer of the Great Western Railway. From this he moved to the Greenfield Cotton Mills in Darwen, Lancashire. Alongside his paid work he took a B.Sc. Degree from London University in mechanics. But neither provided fulfilment. He spent a lot of time in the slums of London and became acquainted with the misery of the unemployed, the poor, and the sick. Again his mind returned to his wish to qualify in medicine, hoping so to soothe his troubled conscience. In January 1912, after giving up his post with the railway, he began at the medical school of the London Hospital. Yet again his hopes of a career in medicine remained unfulfilled. The study didn't live up to what he had expected. Trying to combine the need to earn a living with late night study was frustrating. So he abandoned the idea and spent sometime at Mürren in Switzerland where, by means of climbing and skiing he regained his health. After his return to England he attended the Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre (Birmingham) for a term and followed classes in Social Studies and Religion. With a new-found zest for living he left for the United States of America, where he got to know the American version of Quakerism and entered into discussion with others on political, religious and cultural matters.

After returning to England he again worked as an engineer for a time and got involved in the planning of the garden suburb of

Bournville, built for the 400 employees of Cadbury living there. Just then the First World War broke out. He immediately resigned from his job in order to be available for voluntary relief work. He began by attending First Aid classes and then, together with other Quakers, he took part in the setting up of the First Anglo-Belgian Field Ambulance, later the *Friends Ambulance Unit* (FAU). His first posting was to Dunkirk. Here he helped on the Flanders front line with the French, German and British injured, caring for many in their final hours of life. For two years he worked in mortal danger on the front. Often he fetched soldiers injured in the battle trenches. He also helped with victims of gas attacks at the battle of Ypres. In 1915 he was promoted to Section Leader and worked in an office at Poperinghe.

With the introduction of compulsory military service (no. 2. Act) in England, the FAU was to work under army command.² For this reason Corder refused to be conscripted and returned to England, where he was prosecuted. In January 1917 he was first condemned to 112 days in jail.³ As an absolutist conscientious objector he served a total of two years' imprisonment. In this period he was held in Exeter, in Ipswich and in other prisons, where he was condemned to hard labour which ruined his health. He was only finally released on 8 April 1919. A collection of letters from those years was published in 1918 under the title of "On Two Fronts".⁴ During his time in prison he resolved to do what he could to contribute towards reconciliation between the warring nations in future. He developed the idea of a Quaker centre in Berlin and as a preparation for the tasks of the post-war period, he learnt the German language.⁵ Towards the end of 1919 and following his release, he moved to Berlin in order to take part in the Quaker relief work that had been started there. Immediately he became the first clerk of the Berlin Monthly Quaker group.⁶ Later he developed pneumonia, however, and had to be nursed. During this time he got to know Gwendolen Mary Southall (1891-1972).⁷ She was the second of six children of Wilfred and Isabel Southall and came from Birmingham.⁸ She had qualified as a piano teacher under the tuition of Leonard Borwick (1868-1925) yet, like Corder, she was not happy in her career. So she decided to help with relief work in Berlin. In 1920 the couple decided to marry and returned to England. After the wedding they both went back to Berlin in time for some of the wedding cake to be enjoyed by the Berlin Quaker group.⁹ There were four children from this marriage; the three girls, Jean (1923-2001), Esther Pleasaunce (born in 1926), Annette Christine (born 1928) and their adopted son Neave, born in 1929.

Although Corder Catchpool's unsettled life-style didn't meet with

the approval of his father-in-law, who served as an Elder in his local Quaker meeting, Wilfred Southall allowed the wedding to take place and his support for the couple ensured a financially unburdened future. Initially Corder returned to his work on a garden project in Darwen (Lancashire) and finally he acquired a home there. For supplementary income he gave language lessons in German and French. Every year he undertook a visit with 30 workers to Germany with the aim of promoting reconciliation between the nations. In 1930 the couple with their four children moved to Berlin as Quaker representatives. From 1931 onwards he was secretary of the Quaker International Centre.¹⁰ Here the couple worked with the American Quaker Gilbert MacMaster (1869-1967)¹¹ developing possibilities for peace and for a just settlement between nations. Among other tasks he undertook a lecture tour on peace questions through north-eastern France. Alongside other tasks, he organised vacations and visits by Germans to England. A small booklet by Catchpool about Quakerism, translated into several languages, met with great success.¹² After 1933 conditions for work in Berlin became difficult. Corder Catchpool was several times interrogated by the Gestapo and was twice taken into custody at the *Alexanderplatz* police headquarters. On 3rd April 1933 his home, *Wannseestrasse 14*, was searched for 5 hours.¹³ In August 1935 the Gestapo took him to the headquarters, *Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse 8* for an interrogation under *Kommisar* Nickel. The family were kept under observation by the Gestapo and had to exercise extreme caution on the telephone, in their post and in personal contacts.¹⁴

In order to understand members of the Gestapo better as human beings, Corder Catchpool made frequent contacts and even formed friendships with those in political power.¹⁵ He talked to and corresponded with the ministerial chief Hans Thomsen in the Reichskanzlei, with the press baron of the NSDAP, Ernst Hanfstaengl and with Hans-Heinrich Frodien, an adjutant to Heinrich Himmler (1900-1945).¹⁶ Catchpool was not inclined to condemn his opponents in all matters but to begin by getting to know them and to understand them in their human condition. He also attempted to hold a personal conversation with Hitler but he was not admitted to the Reichskanzlei. During those years this attitude of his was criticised as naive and even Nazi-friendly. In 1935 the English journalist Robert Dell edited the book "Germany Unmasked", in which those who had originally been opponents of National Socialism but who, apparently, had become turncoats or who would at least support Hitler indirectly were introduced. Dell wrote: "A typical case is that of Mr Corder Catchpool, who lives in Berlin and was converted to

Hitlerism after being arrested and imprisoned by the Nazis. He then proceeded to give lectures in various places in England, in which he explained the reasons for his conversion. The chief reason appeared to be that he had discovered that the Nazis had ideals (...). Members of the Society of Friends and many other religious people are influenced by the belief that there is some good in everybody, as there probably is. We must try, they say, to find out what is good in the Nazis rather than what is bad."¹⁷ Corder Catchpool, on the other hand, tried through his contacts, to achieve freedom for various prisoners, or at least, to have the condition of their imprisonment eased.¹⁸ The most prominent prisoner was the German pacifist Carl von Ossietzky (1889-1938), but Catchpool's support and pleading was also directed in support of the publisher Friedrich Küster (1889-1966), the politician Ernst Heilmann (1881-1940), the barrister Hans Litten (1903-1938), the communist Theodor Neubauer (1890-1945) and the poet Erich Mühsam (1878-1934).¹⁹ Apart from these, Irmgard Litten, the wife of Hans Litten and Rudolf Küstermeier, who in 1933 founded the opposition group "*Roter Stosstrupp*", were given help. The efforts of the Englishman were not without success. On 6 June Catchpool was allowed to spend two hours in the concentration camp *Papenburg-Esterwegen*. There he was able to meet Ossietzky and for the first time in two years Catchpool managed to obtain authentic news of his physical and spiritual condition to pass on to the world at large. He learnt from Ossietzky that the political agitation that some of his friends abroad were organising should be abandoned. It would be simpler for Ossietzky to obtain his freedom as relatively unknown than as the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, which writer Ernst Toller (1893-1939) and Hilde Walter were diligently promoting.²⁰ In October 1936 Catchpool wrote in connection with this: "I know from my conversations with the Gestapo (sometimes also out of political considerations) how annoyed people over there can be with these often well-intentioned interventions. So there is, in my opinion, no doubt that he does well in asking his friends over there to exercise reticence."²¹ In the period that followed, Catchpool was able to effect Ossietzky's transfer into a hospital as his general condition had become very bad due to the fact that he had fallen ill with tuberculosis.²² One of Catchpool's greatest political successes was to obtain permission from the Lithuanian government to visit German political prisoners in 1935.²³ There is evidence that his report on the conditions of imprisonment led to improvements and early releases from prison.²⁴ In October 1936 he and his wife decided, out of consideration for their children and because of financial problems, to leave Berlin, which was a serious loss for those German Quakers who remained behind. In 1937/38 Catchpool led a relief mission to

the unemployed of the *Sudetenland* for which he was awarded the order of "The White Lion" by the Czech government. Up to this point he had succeeded in supporting the emigration of many Jews from the German Reich. From 1937 this work was difficult to carry on from London, where he once again had a permanent home, yet it was carried on within the context of what was possible.

During the Second World War he worked as an air-raid warden and stretcher bearer in a London working-class district. Simultaneously he devoted himself intensively to the question of Peace. He was on the Friends Peace Committee, on the Bombing Restriction Committee and in the Peace Pledge Union as well as in the International Fellowship for Reconciliation, War Resisters and National Peace Council. As late as 1940 he travelled to Holland and Belgium, in order to discuss with politicians the possibilities for Peace. After his return to London, from that autumn onwards, he worked for two nights each week in a hospital as a stretcher bearer and transported victims of the London bombing from the ruins into nearby hospitals.

After the war the couple again spent much time in Germany.²⁵ A first short round of visits was undertaken in 1946. From 1947 onwards they looked after the rest home in Bad Pyrmont.²⁶ The history of this institution is little known.

In November 1933 a rest home had been established by the Friends Service Council in Falkenstein, Hesse. It was housed in the former *Hotel Frankfurter Hof*. The manager put bedrooms and a meeting room at the disposal of English Quakers. Responsibility was largely taken by the Frankfurt Quaker group who lived nearby, particularly by Leonore Burnitz (d. 1949), who helped out at the Falkenstein for a time. Hertha Kraus (1897-1968), who herself had experienced being a refugee, had ideas about how to equip it. She initiated the foundation of the *Germany Emergency Committee* on which Bertha Bracey (1893-1989) and Helen Dixon (1865-1939) co-operated. Other helpers were Elizabeth Fox Howard (1892-1957) and, as translator, Helena Rosamund Wallis (1905-2001). The idea was that, in Falkenstein as in Bad Pyrmont later, victims of National Socialism should find rest and recovery for a time. There was daily worship, community singing and music-making, companionable evenings and more. In conversations with individuals, efforts were made to re-habilitate the 'guests', as those who came for help were called out of a feeling of respect. The costs for travel and their stay were largely met by English Quakers. On average they were given two weeks' respite. There were no special procedures for being accepted but acceptance rested exclusively on personal recommendations - or rejections. Decisions were generally taken by the Quaker Office in Berlin, under

the leadership of Corder Catchpool.²⁷ Among the first guests was Ernst Reuter (1889-1953) who was later elected as *Bürgermeister* of Berlin (West).²⁸ He was resident in Falkenstein in the spring of 1934. Among the other guests were Quakers, and members of other denominations, free thinkers, Jews, Social Democrats and Communists. Among the guests there were also many former concentration camp prisoners. After the opening of the Quaker House in Bad Pymont the rest home was transferred there and found a home in *St Josephs Heim*.²⁹ But every spring, as before, there was the opportunity for a short stay in the Falkenstein rest home, which was organised by Helen Dixon. In 1939 both arrangements had to come to an end because of Helen Dixon's death and the imminent war. The home waited for the time when the Catchpool couple could bring new life to these arrangements.

In 1951 both Catchpools returned to Berlin under the auspices of the Friends Service Council to help with the further strengthening of the German Yearly Meeting. The contact with Quakers in the Russian Zone of Occupation and the GDR became a special task, which Gwen took upon herself.

Corder Catchpool's absorbing hobby was climbing in the Alps. In 1952 he, along with his wife and a mountain guide, climbed the *Zumstein- and Dufourspitze* in Switzerland. On the return climb Corder Catchpool fell. As a result of his injuries he was rendered blind, yet he dragged himself on with his companions for another seven hours through a heavy snowstorm.³⁰ In an avalanche crevice at 4100 metres on the *Monte Rosa* he died on the 16th September of exhaustion and heart failure - just before help that his wife and the mountain guide had sent for, could arrive. Corder Catchpool was buried in the cemetery of Zermatt.

Corder Catchpool was one of those Englishmen who, in the difficult period of the Second World War, had never given up contacts with Germans. The foundation for his personal friendships as for social and political engagement was the assumption that there was something good in every human being, which was not always recognisable because of horrible conditions and circumstances. His life was a testimony to this ethical principle. There was in his nature a conservative, reticent trait combined with a certain elegance. He and his wife took upon themselves the needs of their fellow human beings. Their home was unfailingly a place of refuge for those who were looking for help and comfort, for friends and acquaintances, for Germans and English people alike. Already their country home in Lancashire near the town of Darwen had become, from 1920 onwards, a friendly meeting place. The same was true of their home



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Photo 1: The house of the Catchpool family. Picture post card, sent to Halle family (Berlin) in December 1938.



Photo 2: The Catchpool family in February 1948. From left to right: Annette, Oscar, Jean, Sidney, Plesance, Neave, Gwen and Corder Catchpool.

on the *Schlachtensee*, where there was an open gathering every Sunday afternoon, to which between twenty and thirty visitors regularly came. Study circles were organised here and travellers in transit found hospitality. From 1936 the Catchpools' house in Hampstead on Parliament Hill in London became such a meeting place. Among the more prominent visitors in this circle were the pacifist Philip Noel-Baker (1889-1982), the authoress Vera Brittain (1893-1970), and the American writer Lewis Mumford (1895-1990). The house in London was damaged by a firebomb in the spring of 1944 during a German air-attack. But through prompt action by the fire service personnel who happened to be in the house at the time, the fire could be quickly extinguished and the house could continue to be a refuge for those seeking help. It is an irony of history that it should be in this house, which had just missed being blown up by a German bomb, that racially persecuted, political and religious refugees from Germany were at that time being offered help.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 I am extremely grateful to Annette Wallis and Caire Greaves for their kind assistance and availability for interviews on Friday 15th 2004 at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre, Birmingham. The writer also wishes to acknowledge his indebtedness to Marga Vogel-Zimmermann for her helpful comments and critiques in the preparation of this paper. I would like to thank the following for their constructive discussion, advice, criticism, etc. In thanking them I am not suggesting that they would all agree with any or all of my conclusions: Prof. Gisela Bock, Prof. Gottfried Lischke and Christian Scharnefsky, all three from the Free University of Berlin; Josef Keith (Library of the Society of Friends, London) and Ann Upton (Quaker Collection, Haverford College). The standard biography of Corder Catchpool is still Hughes, W.R.: *Indomitable Friend. The Life of Corder Catchpool. 1883-1952* (London 1956, London 1964), a helpful addendum is: Peetz, O.; Lachmund, M. (Ed.): *Allen Bruder sein: Corder Catchpool (1883-1952), ein englischer Freund in deutscher Not* (Bad Pyrmont 1963). For a new biography and bibliography of works by and on Catchpool, see: Bernet, C., *Catchpool, Corder (1883-1952)*, in: *Biographisch -bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon (BBKL)*, 24 (2005), pp. 423-432.
- 2 Catchpool, C., *Die Quäker* (Berlin, um 1920), p.13, and Catchpool, C., *Zur Geschichte der Kriegsdienstverweigerung in Groß-Britannien*, in: *Der Quäker*, 22, 3/4 (1948), pp.237-243.
- 3 Bryan, A., *Corder Catchpool. A Hero Who Never Made Heroic Gestures* (London 1982), p.5.
- 4 *On Two Fronts. Letters of a Conscientious Objector* (London 1918, London 1919². London 1940³. Reprint London 1971).
- 5 Information on Catchpool in Berlin came from Gisela (Gwen) Faust (12th July, 17th August, and 28th September 2005 in Berlin-Wilmersdorf), daughter of

Berlin Quaker Olga Halle (1893-1983). For more on the Berlin Quaker Group see her Richard-L. Cary-lecture: *Nimm' auf, was dir Gott vor die Tür gelegt hat*, which will be published in autumn 2006. Gisela's second name "Gwen" commemorates Gwen Catchpool, who was an intimate friend of the Halle family.

- 6 Faust, *Nimm' auf, was dir Gott vor die Tür gelegt hat* (2006).
- 7 For Gwen see: *Gwen Catchpool. 1891-1972* (London 1972).
- 8 LSF, Dictionary of Quaker Biography.
- 9 Peetz/Lachmund (Ed.), *Bruder*, p.16.
- 10 Lachmund, M.: *Corder Catchpool*, in: *Der Quäker*, 26, 12 (1952), pp.169-172, here pp.170/171; Peetz/Lachmund (Ed.), *Bruder*, pp.20ff.
- 11 For the life of G. MacMaster see Bernet, C.: *Gilbert MacMaster*, in: BBKL, 26 (2006).
- 12 The German version is: *Die Quäker* (Berlin, ca. 1020). A second edition was printed 1925 when the German Yearly Meeting was founded.
- 13 Faust, G., *Die Gründung der Deutschen Jahresversammlung vor 70 Jahren und die Arbeit im Quäkerbüro während der Zeit des Nationalsozialismus*, in: Gesellschaft zur Förderung vergleichender Staat-Kirche-Forschung e. V. (Ed.), *Vorträge, Analysen, Diskussionen. 1994-1996* (Berlin 1996), pp.83-88, here 85/86.
- 14 The Gestapo reports dealing with Quakers in Berlin were published in parts, see: Fischer, G.; Drobisch, K. (Ed.), *Widerstand aus Glauben, Christen in der Auseinandersetzung mit dem Hitlerfaschismus* (Berlin 1985), pp.100-108.
- 15 Fraust, *Gründung*, pp.86-87; Peetz/Lachmund (Ed.), *Bruder*, pp.33-46.
- 16 Berkholz, *Ende*, pp.13-14; Peetz/Lachmund (Ed.), *Bruder*, pp.42-43.
- 17 Dell, R., *Germany Unmasked* (London 1935), pp.17-18.
- 18 Geheimes Preußisches Staatsarchiv Berlin-Dahlem, Rep. 90 P, 104, Orig. Bl.69f.
- 19 Bernet, *Catchpool*, p.427.
- 20 Berkholz, S., *Vom Ende einer Hoffnung. Warum die Bemühungen des Quäkers Corder Catchpool im Fall Ossietzky erfolglos blieben*. (unpublished manuscript, Berlin 1998), p.14ff., p.21, p.32. Catchpool met Ossietzky at Papenburg-Esterwegen concentration camp on the 6th June 1935. *Bundesarchiv, R/58/1135 Reichssicherheitshauptamt*
- 21 *ibid.* p.21; Bernet, *Catchpool*, p.427 and Zehrer, K.: *Quäkerhilfe für Ossietzkys*, in: *Standpunkt. Evangelische Monatsschrift*, 12, 10, (1984), pp.289-291.
- 22 Fischer, G., *Quäkerhilfe für Ossietzky*, in: *Die Weltbühne*, 50/51, (13.12.1988), pp.1578-1581, here p. 1580.
- 23 Peetz/Lachmund (Ed.), *Bruder*, pp.65-66.
- 24 Bernet, *Catchpool*, p.427.
- 25 One year after the war was over Corder Catchpool wrote an open letter to people in Germany to commemorate all victims of war: Catchpool, C., *An die Freunde in Deutschland*, in: *Der Quäker*, 20, 2 (1946), pp.23-24.
- 26 Bernet, C., *Das, Rest Home' für Verfolgte des Dritten Reiches*, in: *Exil. Forschung - Erkenntnisse - Ergebnisse*, XXIV, 2 (2004), pp.75-81, here p.79.
- 27 *ibid.* p.77.
- 28 Brandt, W.; Löwenthal, R., *Ernst Reuter* (München 1957), 278f; see also chapter eleven of Elizabeth Fox Howard, *Downstream* (London 1955).
- 29 Bernet, *Rest Home*, 2004, p.79.
- 30 The dramatic circumstances of his death were described in a separate German pamphlet: *Corder Catchpool (Seine letzten Stunden)*. (Berlin 1952).