

U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum  
Interview with Hugh Jenkins  
January 31, 1997  
Margaret Garrett, Interviewer

Tape 1 of 2, Side A

Name at birth Hugh Jenkins. DOB December 29, 1914; Leicester, England.

Youngest son of eight children, father Baptist minister. Grew up mostly in England. Boarding school in Somerset at about ten. Considered good thing if you could afford it to send child to one of these boarding schools. Oldest two brothers were twins. Father called them Lincoln and Garfield. Then two sisters, Myrtle and Iris. Then four more boys: Luke, David, Noel and Hugh. Twins were fourteen years older than Hugh.

Father was a great man. Welshman, wonderful speaker. Very satisfactory career as minister. Mildly active in politics. Devoted himself a lot to his chapel and his family. Mother also Welsh. Mary Elizabeth Pugh (ph.) Very good singer. Parents met at temperance meeting in Wales. She soloist, he speaker. In Wales. Mother not only raised children but also active in life of church. Home very family oriented. After completing school, two sisters ran a private school. Two of his brothers became ministers. One brother was a business man. Lived through some difficult times. Minister's salary not very adequate. Hugh born 1914, beginning of First World War. Father had to bring up eight children. Sisters realized unless put foot down early they would end up being housekeepers. So all children had duties. Close knit family. Hugh had chores; used to wash up.

Away to school at ten. Good and tough experience. When finished school worked for big international company, then for a big building society, as bookkeeper. Then the war came. Had graduated from public school. In those days going to one of those schools considered adequate education for career he had in mind. When the war came had been working about eight years. Last job in Guilford, Surrey, England.

Before war started he had become involved somewhat with Quakers and work with victims of Spanish Civil War. His wife is Basque from the north of Spain. When Spanish Civil War broke out, British government brought out children from Spain with the idea it would be a temporary

~~brought out children from Spain with the idea it would be a temporary~~ arrangement. With every forty children the Basques sent one teacher. Cities all over England were asked, if they would take one group of children. City where Mr. Jenkins working said they would take a group. City asked for volunteers. HJ volunteered to help prepare hostel where kids were going to live. Later he was asked if he would live in hostel. There were forty children and two women, teacher and teacher's aide. Lots of chores. Needed manpower. Asked HJ to live in the house. He lived in the house and went to his office every day. This was his first association with the Quakers. He had not previously done similar volunteer work. One of his friends was a Quaker and was very involved in developing the project. HJ also had sympathy with Quakers.

After the war started HJ was called up for the Army. He went to the Tribunal about conscientious objection. Tribunal said they thought he was sincere but wrong. They said he should work in Army Medical Corps. He said no, that would mean wouldn't be conscientious objector, wearing khaki uniform. So Tribunal then said ok, work on the land. They gave him so many days to find a job on the land. Mr. Jenkins went to local farmer. Farmer said disagreed with him but needed workers. So farmer took him on to work on the land.

It was difficult for him to take that path. Many disagreed with him. Family did not support. Brother-in-law was an officer in the Army. Two brothers were both ministers. One of his brothers working for Navy. Mr. Jenkins the only conscientious objector (hereafter referred to as c.o.) Family was supportive although didn't agree. Other c.o.s. were working on the land. When he married, finding living accommodations was difficult. Teachers had priority. His wife was teaching, therefore priority. Got a place to live. Landlady said because he c. o., couldn't live there. There was enough hostility for him to realize he was in awkward position. He thought the war cause was just, but that war wouldn't ever answer it. Military preparations for possible invasion were going on. He had registered with Quakers to be on a list of potential volunteers. Had signed up during Spanish Civil War to be a volunteer and was going to Spain. Spanish Civil War ended before he got assignment. In 1944 called up by Quakers.

In 1942 got married. While working on land. Wife had come to England to accompany Basque child refugees from Spanish War. Mission arranged by

Basque government in response to invitation from England. Wife was finishing her education as a teacher so she volunteered to Basque government as teacher to go with the children. At end of Spanish War when children's home in England closed down she became teacher in English nursery school for children of mothers who were working in factories in Guilford. She teaching there, he working on the land. At first thought would not get married until war over. They had been engaged since 1939. By 1942 decided why wait. Got married.

In 1944 Quakers said wanted HJ to go to London to training institute and join team to work in Europe. Acceptable alternative under laws as c.o. Trained by Quakers. Objective to make one into a person who could cope without usual facilities. Training to teach one how to cope. A lot of make believe. Lived in big house in Hampstead. One day would decide house was refugee center. Thousands of refugees coming out of Germany and had to be taken care of. Half of team would be people looking after the house and other half refugees. Refugee half were instructed to behave like people who didn't trust anybody. Another day there were told there had been air raid and house destroyed. They were to find way of keeping selves alive. Useful. People selected who would be on team and then trained as team.

Quaker practices were part of training. On his team only two Quakers, that is, members of Friends Meeting. Others were Baptists, Congregationalists, Jews. Started all team meetings with long period of silence, the way Quakers prepare themselves in religious service. They were aware they represented Quakers and were expected to carry out the principles of the Friends. This an important factor.

Subsequently, when working in Germany when the war was on and under the occupation times, what military authorities wanted and what Quakers would think would be the appropriate thing to do weren't the same. Had to face up to that. For example, housing. In one town, Army billeted them in house that belonged to a German family. Army said family had to leave. Friends team realized family had to be housed somewhere, needed housing. Decided family would live on top floor, team used rest of house. A little example. Got on well with military authorities. Authorities understanding and appreciative of what they were doing.

After training in 1944 assigned to go to Holland. Idea-- in fighting, dikes would be broken and there would be flooding and need for urgent

emergency relief. Never went to Holland. To Belgium. They were civilian relief workers in Antwerp. Doing odd jobs. Replacing normal civic services disrupted by war. While there, message received saying be ready to be on road at 6 the next morning. Twelve on team. Men and women. All in mid-twenties, early thirties. One woman mid-forties. They were spread around in lodgings. Had own cooking things. A school was center of activity. It was a job to get all personal and team belongings together and packed. Five vehicles attached to team. Two ambulances, one big truck, two small trucks. On the road at 6 the next day. After two days driving, arrived at Belsen. Had not known where going. Knew to a camp somewhere in Germany. Arrived four or five days after camp uncovered so all was still like it was. Ten thousand unburied dead.

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Arrived Belsen Saturday evening, in camp Sunday, April 27. Camp 211, place where they kept all the children. Camp in terrible state. Originally camp for 3000 people. About 15, 000 there. Last days before camp overtaken everything broke down--food, water supply. Children in one camp. Inmates made sure children looked after as best they could be. First job of HJ to drive ambulance into camp and get children out.

About three miles up the road from the camp, big German Army establishment with big concrete buildings. Was made into reception center by liberators. Between concentration camp and new camp, liberators established "human laundry." Ambulances divided into two groups. Some ambulances shuttled from camp to mid- station, which was the "human laundry." Arrangement set up to disinfect and clean people up. Other side of mid-station, clean ambulances going from mid-station to new establishment. Mid-station was insulation between diseases and clean area. HJ was driving one of dirty ambulances. He was also truck driver in charge of big truck.

When Quaker team first arrived authorities would not allow female members of team to enter camp. Men were assigned to work in camp and women assigned to work in reception center in hospital. When first there SS guards and SS women were still there. Pretty rough. Thinks authorities didn't want to risk the girls going into the camp. Such an outrageous situation. Nobody knew about Belsen until discovered. Unsettled and unpleasant situation.

Army Medical Corps men working there. So many jobs to be done. Creating a new hospital as went along. Empty buildings being furnished. Supportive services set up as quickly as possible. Friends Service people were among first non-Army people into camp. Six teams called in. Four Red Cross, one Girl Guides, one Quaker team in first appeal for immediate help. Everybody doing what immediately needed to be done. Not highly organized. While evacuating the camp another 1500 died. 25,000 were

saved, taken to new camp. Haphazard.

After first run in the ambulance, he was sent off in truck and told to find whatever would be useful to camp--bed linen, towels. Went to set of houses that had belonged to German high command. Houses were empty. Picked up all bed linen, towels, kitchen utensils, etc. Took to new camp in his truck.

Then discovered farms around camp with unharvested vegetables. Then his job was to go out to countryside and find where there were vegetables. Worked with a local German fellow. German fellow helped identify where the things were. German fellow knew the villages. Recruited people to help. HJ took people to the fields and German fellow stayed with them. When a load of vegetables ready HJ took German people back to villages and food to camp kitchens. That is what he did most of the time. German fellow was very helpful. Very anti-Nazi. Well respected and known in the district.

Some of the German people not very friendly. Went to farm of one lady. She married to high official who wasn't there. She was grumbling about workers. Said they were forced laborers. Mr. Jenkins asked if she saw the concentration camp. She denied knowing about it. He told her what it was like. She was unsympathetic. Lots of people were unsympathetic. But it was not a sea of Nazis. Army brought mayors from towns around Belsen and made them walk through the camp so they should know.

There was a hospital inside the camp. It was really a first aid station. The priority was getting people out. They kept a scoreboard for how many they got out each day. Always trying to beat the previous day's record. First aid station was operated by doctors who had been inmates inside the concentration camp. First aid station had to have hours because the doctors themselves were suffering. One day HJ was at first aid station and they had to close the doors at six o'clock. People outside had spent two days dragging themselves there. HJ thought some of the people would be dead before station opened in morning. Young girl said he must give her something for her very ill mother. He gave her aspirin as a gesture because she was so desperate. About three weeks later this girl came up to him and said he had saved her mother's life.

It was impressive in the new camp the day the barracks were burned down.

Concert given by ex-inmates. Inside the camp were people who had been in symphony orchestras, opera singers. They gave the concert. Very moving. Everybody singing their hearts out. Old camp was burned hut by hut. HJ was general errand boy. Anything that needed a truck. First channel of authority was his team and team leader. She would give general instructions. Most of the time primary job was vegetable run. That didn't take the whole day. His job on team was transport officer--keeping all five vehicles operating. He drove the big truck.

Most of his work inside the camp was taking the workers around. Camp was under the control of the British Army. There were lots of Hungarian soldiers who were used in the camp to do various jobs. He took them around. They were part of the Hungarian Army.

When camp taken over by British Army, idea was to create sanitation zone. Everybody afraid. Camp a hive of tuberculosis, typhus, etc. People were afraid that if fighting went through that zone the people would get out and try to find their way back home and there would be a wave of diseased people. It was arranged that the camp would be handed over intact by Germans to British. Germans working in camp as guards would be retained. German Army retreated from that area and British entered without fighting. Part of the deal was that the Hungarian troops would be considered neutrals. Not prime enemy. Agreed they would stay and guard the perimeter--make sure no one got out. They were manpower. Water system broke down. Drainage system. Everything in disrepair. HJ was in and out of the camp all day. No time to worry about getting sick himself.

Worked as long a day as necessary. To bed about ten or eleven at night. Increasing deceleration. Each day fewer people in camp and less crises. HJ slept in barracks part in new camp. Meals at army field kitchens, ~~Army~~. Team all housed in same area. Team meetings regularly. Mostly reporting sessions. Often didn't see each other during the day. Most of the girls were nurses, one was a caterer. There was one Jewish girl, who was important member of team. She got into camp before relaxation of rules. She used to wear big bronze Star of David on her uniform. When she went into the camp it was very impressive. Inmates felt something to be proud of.

Morale of team was pretty good because too busy to allow environment to affect them. Always had something to do. Always urgent. Completely

separate responsibilities. Impact came after left camp and on next assignment. Delayed shock. They had been highly disciplined, neat and tidy. On next assignment untidy. People didn't turn up for meals on time. Then settled down again. People didn't talk about it. The day after the camp was burned down they were sent off to another job. Had done their job. Getting on with the next job.

Next job interesting, temporary. Railways in Germany had been badly bombed. Forced laborers wanted to get back to their homes in Holland and France. There were trains coming into Germany to point where German railroads were bombed. There were trucks coming out of Germany to the point where railways started. People transferred from trucks to train. The Quaker team's job was to assist in transfer. People had problems with food, etc. Their job was to get people off of trucks and into trains going to Belgium, Holland, etc. Did that for about a week. Railway repaired quickly.

Then sent to Brunswick. Biggest and most time consuming job. Eventually HJ became in charge of huge Polish camp. 3,500 Poles. Twelve of his Quaker team administered it. Very interesting. Very difficult. Poles considered themselves the first fighters in the war--the first country attacked by Germany. Their country badly beaten up. Germans very bad to Poles. Germans considered Poles second class citizens. Germans had brought Poles into forced labor. When war over Poles thought they should be considered heroes because they were the first who started to fight the Germans. They wanted to go home. Couldn't go home because problem inside Poland as to who would govern. So they lived in this camp. His team looked after them. Like a city government. One team member looked out for schools, one clothing. HJ was in charge of the camp. Camp Commandant.



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HJ remembers standing in the camp and seeing the walking dead, gone beyond state of recovery. Survivors had gotten out of camp. But others were dying. That upset him most. Could see them walking from nowhere to nowhere. Remembers thinking, while he working on the land with sun shining those people living under same sky, without any hope of being saved. Living under terrible conditions. It made him think about being conscientious objector and refusing to participate in the struggle. He thought about it a great deal and kept on coming to the same conclusion. War was not the answer. Eventually we would have to get rid of war as a means of settling. Eventually a time when people will say we are not going to have an army. May seem high minded theory. But that was as far as he got. He couldn't persuade himself that he should have been fighting instead. Now he has a sense of desolation when sees the way we still use wars as a means of settling. He still believes that war will never be an answer to our problems.

The Quaker team was in charge of the camp in Brunswick. His job, chief administrator. It was fun because there were awkward situations. 3500 Poles--Polish police force looked after security of the place. A lot of young people. One day there was fighting. Police brought young man in to him to be punished. He gave the young man a lecture and sent him off. Five minutes later head of police force came in and said police had resigned en masse because: There is a riot in camp. Police break it up and get beaten up in process. They settle it and bring the ring leaders in to see HJ. He pats the ring leaders on the head and says be good boys. The chief of police says it won't work. So HJ cut the cigarette rations of the perpetrators for discipline.

HJ left the camp. Went back to England. In the meantime his wife had joined him. She also had become a member of the Quaker Relief and was trained in the same place as he had been. Then she had been sent to join him in the camp. She was a qualified and experienced nursery school teacher. Set up nursery school in the camp. Set it up so well that UNRRA

borrowed her and sent her to other camps to set up nursery schools.

Then both left. They were then assigned to work with young Spanish refugees in the south of France. At the end of the Spanish Civil War there was a tremendous wave of refugees. Many were still in the south of France. Needed social services. Schools. Mr. Jenkins in charge of that for six months. Then the Quakers brought him back to London. He was Overseas Secretary for European work. Responsible for all work in Germany, Austria, Poland etc. The Quaker way--he had responsibility but the Quakers also worked as a group. The committee was in charge. He worked closely with people in Friends House in London but also traveled to Poland etc.

Friends Relief Service was a temporary organization. Friends in England did not have a permanent service group. Created group or service in time of need. Ireland during potato famine. Franco-Prussian war. It had been agreed long before war ended, failing other unforeseen events, that Friends Relief Service would come to an end in May 1948. One of his jobs was going around to all their teams in Austria and Germany etc. and working out with them the way they would hand over their work to local sources. It was a difficult job because everybody falls in love with their work in relief work. Difficult to leave. Quakers felt strongly this was a job they had to do in time of need but not about to start a permanent social service agency. They do have continuing programs right now.

In May 1948 American Friends Service Committee asked him to come and work with them. He came for supposedly two years and worked in Philadelphia. They then said there was a project in Washington. House given to them to provide accommodations, center, for international students. Friends asked him to run that. So HJ and his wife came to Washington in 1951. To run International Student House for 6 years. Never left. He then became Director of Foreign Students Service Council for ten years. Then became Executive Vice-President of National Association for Foreign Students Affairs. Then retired. Is now a member of the Meeting. Became member of the Meeting in Philadelphia, when very much involved. When joined Friends Relief Service only the team leader and one team member were members.

Conclusion of interview