

A Pacifist in a Time of War



RACHEL HIGGINS

Story by Hannah Gould

Rachel Higgins is 83 years old. I was struck by how much she realized the prejudices of people during the war, and of how she stuck to her philosophy of peace.

My roots as a peace person started when I was seven years old, during the First World War. My father was a minister, and he kept getting all this propaganda, and he would throw it into the wastebasket. I got very curious, and I went into the wastebasket and pulled everything out! And what did I see? These ghastly pictures of what the Germans were said to have done to the Belgians, piles of babies' hands that they'd cut off! They were piled way up and these things were so awful! I shouldn't have seen these pictures, but my father didn't know that I was going to get into the wastebasket. I filled my mind with that stuff. Some of it was propaganda and exaggeration, but some of it was no doubt true. So that really, really impressed me, and I had dreams of bombs falling. I don't know any other child around whom it bothered, but it really sank into my subconscious. That's how I first became a peace activist. When World War II came along, I think it was everything together; it sort of added up to the fact that I was not to be a war person, I was to be a peace person, and devote my life to that sort of thing. Peace was my commitment from that time on.

All I knew about the war, before America got into it, was what I had read in the paper. There was a lot of pacifist sentiment over here about what was going on. I don't remember the United States being that interested in getting into the war, but it was being talked about in some government circles that maybe we should enter the war. I felt absolutely numb after the invasion of Poland and after Pearl Harbor. I can almost feel it today; I just sort of went into a state of shock.

Just about that time I signed a pledge which was put out by the National Pacifist Organization. This was a pledge that I would not take part in any military activities or anything of the sort. I found it very difficult to know where to draw the line, and I spent night after night agonizing over it, but of course it was silly because I'd never be called on to fight. I was looking around to see what I could do in a non-violent way so I got a job in the Red Cross headquarters.

It was really hard for me to know where to draw the line about which activities were peaceful, and which activities supported the war. There were some people who came around to collect coat-hangers for metal. The government needed metal to build weapons and that sort of thing. I thought, "Shall I give them coat hangers: That will help them make armaments." Where does one draw the line? Well, they never did get to our house. I was relieved. In the end I came to the conclusion that one never really keeps one's skirts clean because in a world war everyone's involved if they like it or not.

One of the things I noticed greatly during the war was the prejudice. There was so much prejudice for so many different racial and ethnic groups. I think people have forgotten, but Peace Dale was largely Italian during the war, and we were at war with Italy eventually, and people began to wonder about the loyalty of the Italians. There was some talk of shipping them off to internment camps. Just a little ripple that it might not be safe to have them around here. I thought it was the most awful thing I'd ever heard of.

I can remember an incident of discrimination against the Japanese during the war. There was this Japanese man I knew, whose sister was in one of the internment camps. The government at the time was willing to let anyone who wanted to sponsor one of the young people, and to let them come and work. A friend of mine, with the help of the church, brought this man's sister here. Her name was Mary, and she was the most beautiful Japanese girl I've ever seen. Well, she went to South Kingstown High School, and she was very smart. There was another girl at the school whose mother was a teacher, and she was very jealous because Mary got better marks. Letters began to appear in the paper that perhaps we had a disloyal person in our midst. These were really nasty letters, letters about Mary. She was the only Japanese there, the only Oriental in our midst. These letters were trying to stir up hatred against her. Well, Father Greenan, who was the priest at St. Francis Church, knew Mary somehow or another, and he wrote a letter to the paper. It came out in The Narragansett Times defending Mary. He also stuck a copy of this letter under the door of the school. The letters ended. I guess it was a really scathing letter. What a terrible thing to do to a young girl like that.

I think that the war had a good effect on women in general. I only knew one woman personally who worked, and she was very proud of it. She was a society lady, and she went into this factory and did all this mechanical work. When she came out she felt so good about what she'd done. Especially since she'd never done anything like that with her hands. I think the war did a lot for women's morale, because for once they were needed in the factories and places like that. They could do just as well as a man when they got into it. I think women also gained more self-confidence during the war.

I don't remember where I was when the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, but it was so stunning, I had to let it sink in gradually. I had helped to start a program called the Community Program for Peace, and we helped to protest testing for other atomic bombs. I also

picketed, and leafleted, and protested the Vietnam War.

I think World War II was for a good cause. At first I thought we shouldn't go into it, but after Pearl Harbor what else was there to do? I realized that there was really nothing else to do. I think the cause of the war was to eliminate this militaristic group which really wanted to dominate the world.

I don't think any of the changes during the war years affected my life, and my life today was not very changed by the war. I never lost my commitment to being a peace person.

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