

Pages for All Ages:

The Lights of our Minds and our Hearts

by Mary Klein

Some words and phrases to know before you read

- revolted,
- revulsion
- cruelty
- pacifist
- tribunal
- register for the military
- conscientious objector
- campaign
- peace missions
- courts
- organization
- amnesty
- inspiration, inspiring
- engineer
- research
- torture
- concluded
- rational
- emotional

All his life, Eric Baker felt revolted when he learned about people being cruel to each other. He also found that it was hard to get people to talk with him about cruelty. Most people just wanted to ignore cruelty. Even so, Eric Baker believed that people *needed* to talk about cruelty, so that they could end it.

Eric Baker was born September 22, 1920, in London, England. That was shortly after World War One ended, which was a war that killed 37 million people. While he was still a schoolboy, Baker decided that he was a pacifist, and he joined the Quakers.

Just a few weeks before Baker's nineteenth birthday, England went to war with Germany. The English government passed a law that said every young man in the country had to register for the military. Instead of registering for the military, Eric Baker registered to be a "conscientious objector," which is someone who will not fight because war is wrong.

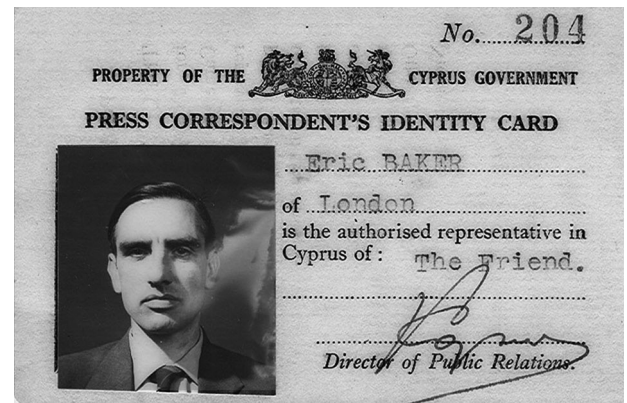
Baker had to go stand in front of a tribunal and answer their questions. This was a group of men who could decide if they thought Baker was really a pacifist or just a coward. They could send him to jail. Afterwards, Baker said that when the tribunal asked him why he thought he could not fight in wars, "I told them simply what I had experienced of the love of Jesus, and how I felt that I was called to answer to the spiritual suffering in the world. They listened very quietly and . . . they seemed satisfied. I felt very young and childlike in talking to them." It took the

tribunal about twenty minutes to agreed to list Baker as a conscientious objector.

Baker spent the years of World War Two helping with the "Starvation in Europe" campaign. He raised money to send food to places destroyed by war. He also worked on finishing his college degree. He would spend the rest of his life working as a peace activist and as a college professor.

In 1946, Baker and his new wife, Joyce, started working for the Quakers. They spent two years running the Quaker Center in Delhi, India. After returning to England, Baker went on four peace missions to Cyprus for the Quakers.

Cyprus is an island in the Mediterranean Sea, which England ruled from 1878 to 1960. In the late 1950s, many different groups were fighting over Cyprus, including different groups from England, Turkey,



and Greece. When Baker saw the confusion caused by so many different groups at war with each other, he decided that the Quakers could not help to make peace in Cyprus, but he thought they could still help the people there.

Cyprus is where Eric Baker met the English lawyer, Peter Benenson. Both men visited Cyprus several times in the late 1950s. Eric Baker was looking for ways to make peace in Cyprus. Peter Benenson was looking for ways to help the courts work better there. Both men saw that many common people in Cyprus were getting thrown into prisons just because they spoke up and told the truth.

Baker and Benenson quickly agreed they wanted to let the whole world know about governments that lock people up for speaking the truth. In 1962, they formed an organization called “Amnesty International,” which is still active today. Amnesty International has groups that meet all over the world. They write thousands of cards and letters each year, asking governments to set prisoners free. Sometimes they succeed.

Peter Benenson and Eric Baker made a good team. As Baker’s wife described them, “Peter was the inspiration. Eric was the engineer.” When Benenson got too excited about certain ideas and went too far, Baker could calm things down and set things straight. When Benenson wanted to excite people about helping to set prisoners free, Baker did the research and found the facts that went into the inspiring speeches and articles and books.

While he was doing research about prisoners, Baker started to learn more about torture. The more he learned, the more he felt revolted, and the more he understood. He concluded that the real definition of “torture” is when a government keeps hurting a person until the person agrees to do what the government says. (He included “rebel groups” along with “governments” in his definition.)

Baker spent the rest of his life fighting torture. He helped the United Nations pass a Declaration against Torture in 1975. He organized sessions about torture at national and international Quaker gatherings. Largely because of Baker’s important work against torture,



Amnesty International won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1977. That was shortly after Baker died suddenly on July 11, 1976.

Eric Baker said that torture is like a disease. Even though it is revolting, and even though people don’t want to talk about it, they must. He said, “If [torture] is to be brought to an end, then rational discussion has as much part to play as emotional revulsion.” That is, the light of our minds and the light of our hearts must work together to do good. ❁

- How do you find the courage to say something hard to say?
- Why do people want to hurt each other sometimes?
- What are some different ways that people can work to stop torture?



Image of Eric Baker’s press card (to serve as a correspondent for The Friend, 1958) from the Special Collections at the University of Bradford; images of Faroe Island stamps honoring the founding of Amnesty International are in the public domain; image of the Amnesty International logo is in the public domain.