

Hitler, Lisbon, and the Unitarian Universalists--
The story of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee
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In 1938 the British Unitarian Neville Chamberlain signed a treaty in Munich giving the Nazi government control of part of Czechoslovakia. The agreement was a personal tragedy for Unitarians in Czechoslovakia. Dr. Norbert Capek had established the first Unitarian church in Prague in the early 1920s. The church had 3,400 members. Also, the democratically-elected president of Czechoslovakia was married to a Unitarian from New York City.

In the fall of 1938 Waitstill Sharp, the young minister of the Unitarian Church in Wellesley Hills, Massachusetts, took a leave of absence. Martha and Waitstill Sharp arranged for friends to care for their two children. Leaving their home and their church and their children was hard. Nevertheless, they were determined to do what they could to get Unitarians out of Czechoslovakia. They boarded a ship for Europe.

Lets us watch three minute selection from the movie: 7:19 to 8:04.

February 23, 1939, the Sharps arrived in Prague. In that city they helped emigration by advising people about United States emigration laws and quotas. They brought applicants who had been unable to get interviews to the attention of the American Embassy. They helped with communication between Czech and American government officials. They arranged transportation to what were, at the time, safer countries. They covered some expenses connected with the interminable red tape.

During his trips out of Czechoslovakia, Rev. Sharp traded dollars for Czech crowns at an exchange rate well above the official one. He used the Czech crowns for relief work within Czechoslovakia. He deposited the dollars in English, French or Swiss banks so the refugees could pick the money up if they got out. The Sharps also gave money to the Czech Unitarian Church for food and clothing, and to pay the Prague Unitarian church mortgage.

March 15, 1939 the Nazis took over Prague. They closed all foreign refugee offices on July 25. Nevertheless, the Sharps stayed on in Prague working to get people with United States quota numbers released from Czech prisons. When the Second World War began in August 1939 the Sharps left Czechoslovakia and returned to their church in Wellesley Hills, Massachusetts.

In May of 1940, as a direct result of Martha and Waitstill Sharp's work, the American Unitarian Association announced the formation of the Unitarian Service Committee. Its purpose was:

To investigate opportunities for humanitarian service both in America and

abroad, and to take action to perform such humanitarian service as may in its judgment seem desirable, and to raise funds to carry out its objectives.

A distinguished group of Unitarians made up the first Board of Directors of the Unitarian Service Committee. The Chairperson was William Emerson, Dean of the School of Architecture at MIT. Other members included Harold Burton, Mayor of Cleveland and later Associate Justice of the Supreme Court; Percival Brundage, senior partner in the Price Waterhouse accounting firm, who became budget director in Eisenhower's administration; and Louise Wright of Chicago, Chair of the League of Women Voters Department of Government and Foreign Policy.

The Unitarian Service Committee opened an office in Lisbon June 20, 1940, staffed by the Sharps, who again took leave from their church and their small children to help refugees. The goal was to save the lives of intellectuals and anti-Nazi political leaders. It was real life drama, something like the drama described in the classic movie "Casablanca." Rev. Sharp wrote:

The days defy description. They were filled from seven o'clock in the morning until midnight, and sometimes after, with interviews, searches for persons about whom the Emergency Rescue Committee had cabled from America, or their agent had cabled from Marseilles; appeals and interventions at the American Export Line, the Pan American Airways, the French Consulate, the International Police (this is the police system of Portugal which regulates the relations of foreigners to the State), the British Embassy, and, daily, at the American Consulate.

The Sharps commissioned a successful painter and musician from Paris, to paint a sign for the Unitarian Service Committee. He painted a flaming chalice, which the committee adopted as its symbol. Seventy-two years later, each Sunday we join with hundreds of Unitarian Universalist communities across the United States and Canada in lighting a chalice as a symbol of our religious tradition.

The Sharps returned to the United States at the end of 1940. Other Unitarians from the United States came to Lisbon to continue their work. In the summer of 1942 the Director of the Unitarian Service Committee, Robert Dexter, met with Allen Dulles. Robert Dexter agreed to carry on espionage activities for the Office of Strategic Services, which was later to become the Central Intelligence Agency. Dexter and other service committee staff carried large sums of money to resistance leaders in France. They also contacted OSS agents in Madrid and in Marseilles for information. The OSS was looking for any significant information picked up from refugees.

One Unitarian Service Committee staff member in Europe was a woman named Jo Tempi. Ms. Tempi was a German Communist. Using her German passport, in June 1944 she established a Unitarian Service Committee office in occupied Paris, two months before

Allied troops liberated the city. Tempi used the money the Service Committee sent her to help the victims of German occupation, mostly Jewish people of Polish, Austrian, German or Russian background. Working in a fifth floor office with no elevator and no electricity, Tempi wrote apologetically that she was unable to get much done between August 18 and August 25, when warfare was taking place in the streets of Paris. After the war the Paris office grew to a staff of twenty, and became a center for a variety of services for refugees. Unitarian churches all over the United States sent clothing to a Unitarian Service Committee office in New York City. There they stored the clothing in a rented building that had once been the stable for J. P. Morgan's horses. From New York they shipped the clothing to the staff in Paris who distributed the clothing to refugees. In Germany the Unitarian Service Committee administered ten homes for Displaced and Unaccompanied Children.

In 1972 Richard Scobie became Executive Director of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. For many years, under Scobie's leadership, the UUSC became a strong and persistent force for social improvement.

Today the UUSC is a stable, mature organization, and rooted in the values of Unitarian Universalism. Led by the Rev. Bill Schultz and by the Rev. Brock Leach, a member of this congregation, it has an annual budget of more than \$6 million.

One of the exciting new projects of the service committee is the Unitarian Universalist College of Social Justice, Brock is the person who got the college up and running. In our association magazine the *Unitarian Universalist World*, Brock says, "We can talk about justice, and think about justice, but to do justice we need to experience the world from the perspective of others."

Back in 1940, when the Sharps first arrived in Lisbon, they found out that the unoccupied south of France was choked with refugees. They heard that the babies of the refugees were in great need of milk. The Sharps spent the first weeks in Lisbon arranging for a trainload of condensed milk to be shipped to Marseilles where they would distribute it. They traveled from Portugal through Spain and they arrived at the French border on July 17. The old French government had approved their visas before the new government in Vichy replaced it. The guard at the border told them that the visas were considered invalid by the new government. Unwilling to give up and return to Lisbon, Martha Sharp insisted on seeing the commander of the border guards. She showed him the milk shipment papers and she explained that unless they let her cross into France, she could not get the milk into Marseilles and feed the children. The commander violated his orders and let them enter.

As they became aware of the large number children in Marseilles, Martha organized a boat and the paper work to take the children to the United States. Some of these children are still living.

Congregation viewed part of the movie *The Minister's War*.