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Donated Quilts Warmed Wartorn Europe

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An hour spent in the World War II section of the history stacks in any library is a grim reminder of the depths of human need. Need translates in the mind of a quiltmaker to warmth and to even the vestige of security a quilt can provide.

It would seem you could give quilts away, and food and clothing. Not in 1945. In Norway, for instance, only relatives could send packages in, and that by license.[1] Finland, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, and Czechoslovakia had been liberated from Germany but travel was restricted in these countries, even one unofficial or foreign person being a burden from the standpoint of food and transportation. Postal service had to be reestablished, and, initially, the weight of individual packages was limited to eleven pounds.

Allied military occupation forces in West Germany and Austria denied entry to civilians. Red Cross workers, in military uniform, assisted the Army with domestic relief.[2] The Russians did not allow people or relief to come into East Germany and Poland. Thousands of Finns were living in the underground bunkers left from the Finn-Russian War of 1939-1940.[3] Greece was being consumed by guerrilla warfare in Russia's effort to find a way to the sea.[4] The shipping organization and capacity of our own country was diminished.

The relief operation that is the subject of this paper is one of many. In the beginning help was given family to family, church to church, and ethnic group to mother country. Private agencies contributed as well as the Red Cross.

Many churches were involved. In Salt Lake City, September 4, 1945, two days after the peace treaty was signed with Japan on board

the battleship, the U.S.S. *Missouri*, 6,000 people of all faiths (Catholic, Episcopal, Jewish, Protestant) and Sons of the Revolution met at the invitation of President George Albert Smith of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the L.D.S. Tabernacle on Temple Square to give gratitude for peace. President J. Reuben Clark (Counselor to President Smith) spoke of the responsibility of the victor for the vanquished, and of the "hundred-odd millions of people whose very existence lies in our hands." [5]

I will only attempt to tell about one phase, the provision of quilts, of the relief work of my own group, the Relief Society of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Relief Society members. The Relief Society is the women's organization of the L. D. S. Church. Its functions cover every phase of a woman's life, one of which is a provision for physical welfare. Each Relief Society is a part of a "ward" and its membership includes the people within a specified geographic area. Approximately five to nine wards comprise a "stake." A variable number of stakes comprise a "region."

Each ward Relief Society produced and donated quilts to the Church Welfare Program, a central administrative organization directly under the president of the Church which provides for members of the church who for one reason or another cannot provide for themselves. It also meets some national and international disasters. The Program is supplied by its own agricultural/limited manufacturing system as well as by donations.

Relief supplies are kept in regional and local warehouses. This storage system was the first means by which relief supplies were sent into wartorn countries in the fall of 1945 as quickly as shipping arrangements could be made. That relief included a stockpile of quilts.

The first relief was sent into liberated countries of Europe in eleven-pound Parcel Post packages. While they were being shipped, President George Albert Smith visited President Harry Truman and secured his cooperation to ship bulk relief supplies to Europe. At the same time, November 1945, other General Authorities arranged with shipping companies and relief agencies for bulk, or carload, shipments to Europe.[6]

President Smith chose a member of the Council of theTwelve, Ezra Taft Benson, who is now president of the Church, to go to Europe

and open the missions in all the countries. It was necessary to get inside the German and East European countries to contact and arrange with the leaders to receive supplies, and, at the same time, to negotiate for warehouses and for transportation of the supplies into the countries. Fred Babbel assisted Elder Benson and later wrote an account of the activities.

Carload shipments, including food, clothing, and bedding, began February 15, 1946, to the liberated countries and to West Germany, Austria, Poland and Syria. By December 1946, 92 carloads (2,000 tons) of relief supplies were in Europe. By March 1947, the way was prepared for shipments to church members in East Germany. Relief was given to the general population as well as to church members, particularly in areas of worst devastation.[7]

The European Recovery Program, commonly known as the Marshall Plan, was enacted into law in April, 1948. The first Marshall Plan ship, the *Noordan*, arrived in the Netherlands on April 26.[8] Thereafter the L. D. S. Church Relief Program tapered off, having sent 133 carloads of relief goods to Europe.[9]

With this background information in mind, we will turn now to a discussion of the quilts in this operation. Each Relief Society in the war risk zones of the United States (California, Washington, Oregon, and the North Atlantic coastal states) had been instructed in December 1942 to keep first aid supplies in a locked cupboard in the Relief Society room. These supplies were to include twelve quilts or blankets with wool content, at least two of these being blankets.[10]

Quiltmaking has been a part of the Relief Society program from its inception in 1842. Each ward Relief Society gave one or more quilts made in Relief Society to the Church Welfare Program each year. Most had already been given to the needy, but there were 3,326 left in the Church Welfare Storehouses in the fall of 1945. Individual Ward Relief Societies then allocated 6,636 more quilts and 1,941 blankets specifically for Europe from their so-called war emergency kits.[11]

A mass drive for bedding, clothing, and soap was conducted by the Relief Society on December 10-11, 1945. The count for the December drive, a total of 5,044 quilts and 1,403 blankets, includes quilts from these ward kits sent to the regional warehouses at this time.[12] It is

reasonable to believe that stake and mission Relief Societies on the East Coast held their quilts for packages sent directly from their own areas. These figures indicate that there were sufficient quilts for the Parcel Post packages, local need, and the beginning of the collection which would go later in the boxcar loads.

The aim of the Relief Society and the Church Welfare Program was to send one eleven-pound package of bedding and one eleven-pound package of clothing to each member. There were believed to be 7,245 members of the church in the liberated countries. Consequently, 15,112 packages (one-half were bedding and one-half clothing) were mailed to Norway, Finland, Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Czechoslovakia, and also to Japan, the majority between October 29, 1945 and March 31, 1946, and the remainder by December 31, 1946. Two hundred of the 354 packages to Japan were prepared by the Relief Societies in the Central Pacific Mission (Hawaii). No count was found for packages sent by Canada to England. Beautiful letters of appreciation were received by the leaders of the Church, some of which were published in the Relief Society Magazine in February 1947 in the report by Marion G. Romney.[13]

Quilts were needed to continue the program for the boxcar shipments. The annual statistical report of the General Board of the Relief Society of the entire Church gives the total number of quilts made in all the workday meetings of the individual wards during one year, but does not indicate clearly what percentage were given to the Church Welfare Program. The percentage figure includes all sewn items, "quilts, other bedding, and clothing;" therefore, any estimate must be approximate. Quilts were more commonly made for Welfare than clothing, which was mainly nightwear or practical children's clothing. In 1945, twenty percent of all sewn items made in the Relief Societies of the entire Church were given to the Church Welfare Program. The remainder were for local need. The individual Relief Societies responded to the crisis in the wartorn countries by giving fifty percent of sewn items in 1946 and sixty-two percent of sewn items in 1947 to the Welfare Program. There was an increase in the number of quilts made as well as a higher proportion sent to the Welfare Program. There were 27,310 quilts made in the Relief Societies of the entire Church in the two years, 1946-1947.[14] The number of women

participating in the sewing program increased from less than thirty percent to almost forty percent in the same time.[15]

There were approximately 1,200 Relief Societies in Utah-Idaho-California alone, the three states with eighty percent of the church population and large ward memberships. The statistics are consistent with the understanding of the author from former Relief Society presidents of the post-war era that each Relief Society gave one or two quilts to the Church Welfare Program in an ordinary year but made five or more quilts for the Welfare Program each year right after World War II. Quilts made in the home, donated to the Relief Society, and earmarked for war relief are not included in the statistical report.

Relief Societies throughout the United States and the world participated in the relief program according to their numbers and their means. England, Sweden, Switzerland and the liberated countries as well contributed to Germany as their own most immediate needs were met. In the summer of 1947 the Netherlands Mission, men and women alike, raised potatoes in road medians, vacant lots, and backyards and gave the harvest of seventy tons of potatoes to the East and West German Missions. There was a corresponding sewing project for those who did not have a place to plant potatoes. The potato project was expanded in 1948 to include the purchase of herring to be sent to Germany. This story is told in a article by William G. Hartley, research historian in the Church Historical Department.[16]

The Church Welfare Program continued providing supplies to the needy in the United States, but the great focus was in Europe, specifically Germany and Austria, and the eastern European countries. Recollection of comments by those involved in my own area indicated there was a desire and an effort to insure that quilts for Germany and Japan were as good in quality as the quilts that went to the liberated countries.

A second major drive was conducted by the Relief Society May 26-27, 1947, as a result of messages delivered in the April 1947 Church-wide Conference.[17] According to this Conference Report, a plea was made by President J. Reuben Clark on behalf of the people of Germany. He read a letter from Walter Stover of the East German Mission which related an account of his visit to one sister whose

husband was killed in action in Russia. She lived with her three children in an attic which had no heat, no glass in the windows, no water, the toilet facilities frozen, and little bedding. The family were given Welfare supplies, clothing, food, and bedding, and their windows were boarded up for them, but no one could supply heat.[18] The scenario was undoubtedly a common occurrence.

The feeling for the plight of the people of Germany, now almost two years after the close of the war, was such that our whole neighborhood sought out my mother as a Relief Society worker and volunteered their clothing and bedding. May 26, the first day of the great collection, was also my youngest brother's birthday. In the morning a woman came to our door with a considerable amount of clothing and bedding. I helped her lay it out on the living room couch. She was about to leave, but turned back with a stricken look on her face to pick up a particular blanket. "I can't give this!" she said, and took the blanket and left. A couple of hours later she came back. She neither knocked nor spoke, but walked right in, put the blanket down, and left. It made such an impression on me that the scene and the time on the clock made a photographic image in my mind. It was five minutes to eleven.

This lady was not a member of our church. The counterpart to this story was told to me by a friend in Prosser, Washington, when I read her this part of my paper. She told me that there is a lady who comes from Germany upon occasion to visit her sister in our town. When she first came to visit years ago she met my friend and discovered she was a Mormon. She exclaimed with joy, because she had always wanted to meet the people who sent those good packages to Germany. She and her husband were friends and neighbors of a Mormon family in Germany, and whenever they got supplies from the Church after World War II they shared with her. A special friendship has developed over the years between this lady and my friend.

The Church News Section of the *Deseret News* reported on May 31, 1947, that the Relief Society was swamped with clothing, shoes, blankets, and quilts. The response astonished the leaders of the Church. It was noted that warm Arizona sent more than 100 quilts and blankets.[19] Total numbers were not readily available.

The spirit of the time is shown in an article in the 1973 *Ensign*, on

the life of Mary Smith Ellsworth, the wife of the president of the Northern California Mission, headquartered in San Francisco. She listened to an account of the suffering of the members in Germany given by the wife of the West German Mission president, who had just come from Germany for the April 1947 Conference. Mary Ellsworth Smith raised her hand and said, "Northern California Mission will send 100 quilts!" That mission had 145 beautiful quilts and blankets for Europe by the end of June.[20]

Quilts made in Relief Society were quilted, both to teach the members and to inspire the recipients. The women were taught that it was well to perpetuate the art of quilting. There were 64 to 74 hours spent per quilt on the quilting, each woman who worked on the quilt giving 3.5 to 6.25 hours.[21] Pieced tops were generally contributed by members. Wool quilts were not common in Relief Society but were made in the home and were emphasized greatly in the 1947 drive. Wool quilts were generally tied.

The quilt chairman put a quilt on the frame early in the morning of Relief Society workday to have it ready by 9:30 or 10:00 A.M. Sixteen women could quilt until it was necessary to roll the sides. The business meeting was conducted and lesson given during lunch to save time. Quilting continued until 4:00 or 5:00 PM., and then the quilt frame was tipped up against the wall until the next meeting.

An accepted policy was to finish a quilt in two meetings, even one, lest the quilters get tired. It might be finished by the quilt chairman with volunteers in her home, or by the president and her counselors. Enthusiasm was maintained by the expediency of the work.

Quilts for war-stricken people have particular meaning for me because of my mother, Nettie Emily B. Bennion, and her work with Relief Society quilts, and because of my grandmother and aunt. I remember specifically the cold Saturday morning, November 1945, that I was home from school for my birthday. The house was charged with feeling for the project to be done, that of tying a quilt for Europe. This quilt was one of many family quilts to be tied, bound, and donated to the Relief Society or mailed as part of the Relief Society project.

The quilt tops had been made over the years by my grandmother, Mary Mortensen Bjork. I first saw them when I was about sixteen.

They were stored in a large wooden box and a steamer trunk along the north wall in the granary on the Bjork farm, and in three steamer trunks in my grandmother's house. They were heavily mothballed.

The material in the quilts came from clothing which had been given to my grandmother by people to whom she peddled fruit, flowers, and eggs over a period of many years. Some of the material had been diverted to make silk, velvet, and lace dresses for my sister and me. The store of quilts, mostly **Crazy Patch**, grew each winter in a never ending sewing project. The quilts were sewn with skill, every seam secure on the inside of the quilt.

I was often the grandchild on call to help lay out the blocks on the floor, moving them about one by one to balance the colors and achieve the greatest visual effect. There would be enough blocks for three or four quilts ready for a session, and by the end of an afternoon, they would be matched and pinned, ready to sew.

On the day of the radio broadcast of the meeting of all faiths in Salt Lake City, September 4, 1945, my mother, grandmother, and aunt talked about giving some quilts. I went away to school, but they began their project, tying and finishing the quilts in our home in the spare hours after each worked a full-time job as well as keeping house. My mother tended between two and three thousand chickens while my father worked, still trying to recover from the depression. My aunt, Nellie B. Peterson, worked at a bakery. My grandmother was still raising and selling flowers in the summertime.

Only wool quilts were sent to Europe from our family. My mother was adamant about this. They were warm, and tough for hard wear. She said the family could do with cotton and silk quilts. The batts were wool, carded by grandmother, or worn wool or wool and cotton blankets. The wool batts were best. The backings were from my mother's collection of dark plaid flannel or soft paisley cotton kept for this purpose. The collection was supplemented by any suitable material my mother and aunt could find for ten cents per yard.

A typical quilt was made of 14-inch blocks, five across and six down (70 by 84 inches). Pieces were sewn with inside construction to a 14-inch square of cotton. Each quilt required two lengths of 36-inch material for backing. Edges were turned in to each other, so that no flannel would show on top, and stitched by hand. The quilt would weigh about seven pounds. Figure 1 shows a typical wool quilt made

Figure 1. Typical wool quilt (1920) made by Mary Bjork, the top scarcely worn after over sixty years' winter use. (Photograph by Richard N. Peaden)

by Mary Bjork. This one has been in use for over sixty years. Figure 2 illustrates a finished and an unfinished block with inside construction.

I helped some in making the quilts, by cutting apart beautiful clothing to be made into quilts. At one time we cut for three days, the clothing and cut material covering the entire kitchen floor. On the third day I realized I had lost the feeling in the nerve of my thumb, and I did not regain it for six months.

The quilts were turned in to the Relief Society and earmarked for Europe. Later a contribution of $5.00 per quilt was sent for shipping. The quilts were given freely, but it was sometimes a problem to find the $5.00.

The stories told in the April 1947 General Conference about the sufferings of the German people were so heartbreaking that the family sent several quilts as tops, just making a smooth cotton edge to put by

Figure 2. Finished and unfinished block showing inside construction. (Photograph by Richard N. Peaden)

the face, in addition to finished quilts.

After the carload shipments from the Church Welfare Service tapered off, the family sent boxes, primarily quilts, to Austria and Czechoslovakia. Greece was on my mother's list, but there is no record in the Church Historian's office of relief to Greece; therefore I feel ours went through the Red Cross. For forty years, as I watched movies about Greece or the Mediterranean, I watched for American quilts, even knowing the movies were mere stories made on sets!

After the European project my grandmother continued to make quilts, but her health was failing. These quilts had some poor materials in them, and they were smaller. She called them "buggy" quilts, from horse and buggy days.

However, there were sufficient quilts from the original collection to send boxes to Korea, which were prepared in August-September 1951. Boxes also included homemade wool clothing, bandages, quality white flannel for diapers, and sewing supplies. As one box was prepared my mother scooped three or four double-handfuls of buttons from her button box (these were buttons from the elegant clothing), packed them, and dropped them in the box. The box was no more than shipped when she realized she had been hasty. Thereafter we never had a matched set of buttons. I'm sure they didn't in Korea, either.

At this time, the quilt box was in the basement of our own home. The box was almost empty with only five quilts left, and the errant thought flashed through my mind that there would not be a quilt for me. I as quickly said to myself, "For shame, a selfish thought!" and helped pull out another quilt to put on the frame. I was now married, and had stayed with my parents for the birth of our first baby, my husband having been drafted into the Army.

Mary Bjork died in late October, 1951. The quilt project was over. How many quilts of her making were sent overseas? No one had counted.

My brother David R. Bennion of Menlo Park, California, moved the quilt box to his ridge property in the Santa Cruz Mountains in 1971. He photographed the box for me in 1986 (Figure 3) and measured its capacity. The so-called "quilt box" which reminded us of the endurance and creativity of our grandmother was apparently adapted by her for quilts, which overflowed the storage facilities in the farmhouse. It was a practical all-purpose box, commonly called a tack box, used to hold harness, collars, horse blankets, combs, and curry brushes. It was commonly taken to county fairs to carry this gear. Boxes like this were also used for grain, the slant lid preventing a horse from "nosing" into it.

My brother folded quilt tops into the box, and estimated that it would hold fifty to sixty wool quilt tops, for which it was reserved. The four steamer trunks, now owned by granddaughters, may well have held another fifty wool quilt tops in addition to silk and cotton tops, as well as household quilts. Tops were also made continuously during the relief project, as with the material I helped cut. A personal survey in 1986-1987 of quilts inherited by the grandchildren of Mary Bjork included sixteen silk tops and approximately twenty-two cotton tops, but there were only six wool tops of the original collection in all the family. There surely were one hundred and twenty-five wool quilts, and probably one hundred and fifty, sent by our family for war relief.

The Quilts for Europe research project was a surprise to most of the sixteen grandchildren of Mary Bjork, who had had no comprehension of the quantity of quilts made, nor that they were sent for war relief. Two of Mary's grandsons served in World War II. Four grandchildren lived out of state, and seven were very young. The exceptions

Figure 3. The quilt box. (Photograph by David R. Bennion)

are my sister, Dorothy B. Potter, and cousin, Shirley P. Petersen, eldest daughter of Nellie Petersen, whose memories have bolstered mine.

There was a quilt top saved for me. My grandmother had made three tops for granddaughters who married tall men. I have the only one that remains. My mother gave it to me when we returned from our travels with the Army in 1953.

Shirley P. Petersen said, "I always wondered how they (our family) had a living room because the couch was always pushed up against the window, and the quilt frames were up." Shirley's family lived next door.

Shirley remembered the frames and quilts but had forgotten what they were for. With her memory prodded, she recalled and described the large wooden crates (slats nailed onto a frame over a cardboard box) being packed on our kitchen table, and bringing her clothing to go into them. She added her special memories of Mary Bjork making

Figure 4. Mary Mortensen (Bjork) with baby sister Amalia and grandmother, Else Marie Jacobsen. Mary made the voyage to America in care of a woman on board the ship after this picture was taken in early spring, 1876, preceding her family while she could still go on a child's half-fare. (Photograph by H. A. Hald, Aalborg, Denmark.)

quilts on the sewing machine on her sleeping porch. (Figures 4 and 5)

I like numbers, and I would like to have known exactly how many quilts the Relief Society made and collected for the war-stricken countries after World War II. Some of that information is obscured by the grouping of items in statistics. Some work was never counted and some records are lost. I estimate, based on information gathered for this presentation, that 38,000 to 40,000 quilts were made and donated by the L. D. S. Relief Society and its members to the war-stricken countries after World War II. Numbers are relative, but the selflessness of the women who gave the gift is an indelible memory, needing no count. The work was considered to be a personal responsibility.

Figure 5. Nettie Emily Bjork Bennion in her wedding dress (1921).

My father survived my mother by twelve years. In November 1970, in his last conversation with me before his last illness, he asked me what our family should do about quilts now. Should he give his own family quilts to Welfare? I told him that they would be treasured by his children. I also assured him that his family would always strive to meet the welfare calls of the Church and community. And I promised him I would do the best thing I knew to do, and that was to teach, quilting being one of the things I teach.

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