

Margaret's War

During the War the parishioners of Stuntney, and the readers of the Ely Standard, received irregular updates on the war work of the vicar of Stuntney's independent and capable daughter Margaret Helen Barber.

Margaret was born late in 1887 when her father, the Reverend Robert William Barber (1853 Heage, Derbyshire), was vicar of Chippenham. Her mother was Adeline Elizabeth Guinness (1864 Downybrook, Ireland), a member of the wealthy Irish banking and brewing family. She had two brothers: Arthur (1886 London) and Clement (1893 Chippenham). From Chippenham the family moved parishes several times – first to St Mary Stoke (Ipswich), then to Ely (1915-17) where they lived at Orchard Cottage, Lynn Road and Robert was chaplain of the cathedral and vicar of Stuntney. Robert's final parish before his retirement was Pampisford (1915-17). All three children were educated at independent schools and, by coincidence, Margaret was never with her family on a census night:

- In 1891, aged three, she was a "visitor" in Bournemouth, in a lodging house run by Robert and Elizabeth Flood – there were no other immediate family members present
- In 1901 she was boarding at St Paul's School, Parkstone, Dorset
- In 1911 she was one of four boarders in the house of Dr John Procter at the Paddock, Lydd, Kent, where her trade is given as "clergyman's daughter"!

At the outbreak of the War Margaret trained in first aid and nursing as a V.A.D (voluntary aid detachment member) and volunteered for service in Serbia, travelling there on the *Sadich*. Her father later heard from a passenger on the same ship that, on the voyage out "*she made it her business to superintend the livestock on board and insisted on the Greeks killing sheep her own way*".

Margaret's destination in Central Serbia was the Berry Mission¹ (full address Feldpost, Feldmarandenhans, Terapije, Vrnjatchka Banja). The Unit controlled six hospitals, containing an overall total of about 360 beds. The Terapia was the principal surgical hospital, and the most serious cases, as far as possible, were lodged there. Margaret arrived at the unit in the Spring of 1915 to take up work as a "lady orderly" – which was the hospital equivalent of a "maid of all work". The staff there had just got a typhus epidemic under control, but, in fact, were involved chiefly in looking after the local Serbian population and had no war wounded to care for at this point. They did, however, have contact with the enemy, as their orderlies were Austrian prisoners of war. With little fighting in the area, many British medical units were standing "inactive" and nursing staff and military authorities alike felt they could be better occupied elsewhere. Wounded Serbian forces finally arrived in the unit in October 1915 and the hospitals filled rapidly.

Margaret wrote home on 31st August 1915, before the influx of patients. It was 4th January 1916 before she was next able to dash off a postcard home. The card obviously had passed through enemy hands, as it was marked "Zenzur Arteilung", which may account for its almost holiday postcard tone: "*Having a lovely time. Wouldn't have missed it for anything. Longed to hear news; only hope you are well and safe. May be sent home soon, so look out for another job for me.*"

Margaret was right; when Bulgaria invaded Serbia the authorities began to make arrangements to send all foreign missions home. The sound of the Austro-German big guns could soon be heard at

the Berry Mission. Two days later, on 6th January 1916, Margaret wrote a letter to her father on the back of a temperature chart: *"We hear we may be sent home soon. I do not want to come home yet, so if I get a chance I shall join another hospital and nurse Serbian prisoners or Austrian soldiers. I and three sisters want to stay on and do a little more now we are here."*

On 10th March 1916 the Ely Standard shared with its readers what happened next: *"Miss Margaret Barber arrived at Ely on March 7th. The Berry Unit, 25 in number, left Vrnjatchka Banja on Feb 21st. The Austrian invasion had caused shortage of food, with little but bread for themselves and their patients. Their captivity was not a serious matter; little more than that their former prisoners, Austrian orderlies, now became their guards. The grateful Serbians presented them with a roast pig for their journey. At Erusheontz they were courteously entertained by an Austrian doctor. At Belgrade they slept on the floor of the waiting room. At Budapest a German officer from Hamburg, who had been most friendly in the train (claiming racial affinity) took possession of some of the party and showed them round the town. At Vienna they were no longer regarded as prisoners. Strict regulations demanded eight days of waiting at Bludenz, the Tyrolese frontier station. A Czech officer conducted them to their hotel, and Slatin Pasha (a famous Austrian colonel) saw them off, plying them with chocolate. At Zurich Sir Cecil Hertslet (British Consul-General for Belgium) gave them the first tidings of Nurse Cavell, the King's accident, and the evacuation of Gallipoli, also that an aeroplane had dropped gramophone needles on Townshend's column at Kut. Thence home via Paris and Havre in excellent health, having suffered little discomfort, and met with nothing but kindness all the way."*

Meanwhile, beginning in April 1915, the Ottoman Turkish authorities rounded up tens of thousands of Armenian men and had them shot, allegedly for siding with the Russians. Hundreds of thousands of Armenian women and children were deported – and an estimated 400,000 of these deportees did not survive the march south towards Syria and Mesopotamia. Armenian refugees flooded into Russia and the Mediterranean ports, where starvation and disease claimed further lives. An exact death toll is unknown, but historians now estimate that at least one million Armenians - and possibly many more - perished in this attempted genocide. Back in Britain, organisations such as the *Armenian Refugees (Lord Mayor's) Fund* were set up to provide financial aid to those who had survived massacre and deportation. By 19th April 1915 50,000 Armenians had been killed in the Province of Van, and it was here that Margaret next went with the Lord Mayor's Armenian Refugee Expedition to Van.....

On 18th November 1915 the Times stated: *"A telegram received by Mr. Papadjanian, a member of the Duma, regarding the thousands of Armenian refugees who succeeded in reaching Etchmiadzine, concludes:- "Doctors, nurses, provision for food, and medical treatment are urgently needed. Every delay means the loss of hundreds of lives.""* Meanwhile a correspondent from the Lord Mayor's Expedition wrote: *"Our volunteer group will leave Igdir on October 20th. A long caravan of refugees has already set out from Igdir and taken the road to Van. A part of them are villagers that rush to return to their ruined land. The fields and villages are deserted. Only the howling of dogs can be heard in the fields of Abagha day and night. Cold, hunger and Kurds - these are the enemies of the returning refugees. Kurds still kill and plunder whenever they get the chance. We found three corpses near Kara-Bulagh and two on the road to Kizil-Dize.....We all are troubled to see the endless suffering of the nation. The road from Berkri to Timar is covered with the slaughtered corpses of the villagers. These are the victims of the previous retreat, who unaware of the temporary siege of Berkri, kept on*

coming and were ruthlessly massacred. They are fallen and their expressionless gazes are looking up at the sky to beg for mercy and protection, but in vain..." Margaret was not with this particular group, as she left for Armenia with the team which went out in April 1916 – but these are the sights she would have seen and the issues her group had to deal with.

When the Turkish forces returned to the area of Van in August 1916 everyone, except Margaret, headed back home to England; she proceeded to Petrograd where she worked temporarily at the Anglo-Russian Hospital which was in a princess's palace in the Nevski Prospect. Here she nursed wounded Russian soldiers.

In October 1916 Margaret joined the Friends' War Victims Committee Unit and went with them to the Samara area in East Russia. The hospitals in this area of the Steppe had all been closed when the doctors were called up for war, and the work was chiefly with local peasants and the Tartars. Margaret started to learn Russian here and was later embarrassed when she mixed with people in Moscow who mocked her peasant-like turns of phrase. It was here that Margaret heard of the removal of the Tsar, but this seemed to have little immediate effect on the locality. The nurses even had the opportunity of a holiday cruise on the Volga in the Summer of 1917, but this was followed by a time of harvest failure and starvation. Margaret particularly supported a group of fifty Germans who had been civil prisoners since the outbreak of the war. She also worked with Austrian prisoners of war who were acting as orderlies.

The Friends' Unit broke up in May of 1918 when Russian doctors returning from the war again took up their roles. The village Soviet presented Margaret with an ikon and an address in appreciation of her work, and the authorities gave her official papers for "Comrades" in Moscow. She left for Moscow on 16th May. The rest of the British group came home in June 1918.

In Moscow Margaret and her two companions were met by Countess Tolstoy and Margaret was placed in the "governess' home" which was full of foreigners who had originally been working with wealthy families in Russia, and now wanted to get home. Here they were given food coupons and many ended up semi-starved. Margaret, wishing still to be nursing, joined an Armenian Unit for refugees to minister to the Armenians who she heard were fleeing from the Turks over the Caucasus Mountains to Vladikavkaz. It was while in Moscow that she received an official letter saying that she was now a Red Cross nurse and should be treated as such

After three months of delays her group left in August 1918 for the Bolshevik Armenian Hospital in Astrakan. She was the only British member of this party which numbered six in all, including one Armenian and two Russian nurses and two partially trained doctors ("feldchers"), all women. Margaret was thus caught up with the Russian Revolution and was in fact working in a Soviet hospital when it occurred. *In the Cambridge Times of 20th November 1918 Mr Reynolds Ball (who had been with the Friends' Unit and with Margaret's group thereafter in Moscow) told the church at Pampisford how he had left Margaret at Astrakan on 21st September. He told them how she had travelled there from Petrograd in a railway goods waggon provided by the Russian government and packed with cloth and boots made from bark, destined for the destitute Armenians. She was escorted by Bolshevik soldiers who shared their rations with her, and the journey took a week.*

In Astrakan there was no hospital, and Margaret joined a doctor and other nurses in a large house crammed with refugee families, many of whom were suffering from dysentery because of their poor

diet. They rearranged the top floor of the building as a hospital, but in November 1918 the whole building was taken over by the authorities and it took three weeks to relocate the hospital. Most of the refugees with whom Margaret was working were moved into a freezing barracks on the edge of town, which was then further flooded out when a further thousand fresh refugees arrived from Baku and Petrofsk. Margaret herself then fell ill with typhus, no doubt from the insanitary conditions in which she was then working. However, on recovery, she and her fellow nurses threw themselves with enthusiasm into the local study-circles for singing and drama. She recorded that better quality food was issued to the hospitals and that hospital workers were relatively well-paid at this point. She saw British planes dropping bombs on Astrakan late in 1918, but recorded that this did not result in any personal animosity towards herself.

After the British took Baku in 1919 it was decided to attempt to repatriate some of the Armenian refugees on medical grounds, so in October Margaret joined a Red Cross deputation for this purpose. When she arrived in Port Alexandrovsk, enroute to Baku, she was entertained by the “Whites” / Cossacks who treated her well, but separated her from her companions because of her nationality, and told her she would not be allowed to proceed to Baku or return to the refugees. They refused to recognise her and her companions (who were placed under house arrest) as Red Cross operatives. Margaret was handed over to the British Mission at Petrofsk on 6th October and they commenced her repatriation via a Hospital Ship sailing from Constantinople. She arrived home on 15th December 1919.

Margaret wrote the autobiographical work “*A British nurse in Bolshevik Russia the narrative of Margaret H. Barber, April 1916-December 1919*”ⁱⁱⁱ which was published in 1920. She also commented on the reaction of the British authorities on her journey home when she consistently refused to endorse their stories of Bolshevik atrocities.

Margaret did not resettle in Cambridgeshire – she returned to the USSR where she became a Soviet citizen and married. She died in 1965, aged 78, at Simferopol – the capital of the Crimea.

The photograph below comes from 1915 and shows the staff at the Berry Mission in Serbia. Margaret is the VAD (i.e. no red cross on the uniform) second from the left towards the back.



This second photograph is the Armenian Soviet Hospital staff in September 1919. Here Margaret is the only Red Cross nurse.



ⁱ The story of the Berry Mission by Dr James Berry can be found online at https://archive.org/stream/storyofredcrossu00berriala/storyofredcrossu00berriala_djvu.txt

ⁱⁱ A copy of Margaret's autobiography is held by the Imperial War Museum. It is packed with details of her observations of life during her years in Russia.