

Conscientious objector suffered for his beliefs

Jack Rogers spent most of World War II in prison as a conscientious objector (CO). He remained a devout Methodist and pacifist until his death recently. He was 94.

In a 2002 *Press* interview, Rogers said “something must have rubbed off” on him from his Methodist upbringing and from his father, a union secretary, Labour Party stalwart and mayor of Whanganui for 23 years.

Rogers was pushed through the grades at school and matriculated (gained university entrance) at 13. He then “messed about” before starting an electrician’s apprenticeship at the Whanganui freezing works.

He was ordered to report for military service in 1941 but refused. He enjoyed the irony of his father, a member of the Labour Party’s executive, helping form legislation to allow conscription.

He also cherished the memory of his father standing up in court and asking if he could serve the one-month jail term handed to his son.

The tribunal refused his father’s request and Rogers was marched off to Whanganui Prison. When his sentence was up, he was ordered again to report for military training. He refused and was escorted by armed guard, on a train, to Trentham army camp near Wellington where he and 21 other COs were held as prisoners.

A sergeant of the guard, who remembered Rogers from a pre-war Bible camp, arranged for him to escape but he refused to leave. He wanted to make a point about the immorality of war by remaining a prisoner.

The COs spent some time in the guard house, which they shared with soldiers on various charges. No one abused them. Some seemed

to support their stand.

“I do not remember any hurtful comments or insults,” Rogers said.

Late in 1941, the COs were moved by rail to the new Strathmore Camp, near Rotorua. This was not complete and the men were accommodated at first in bell tents. The atmosphere was relaxed. Rogers and other members of the Christian Pacifists enjoyed long discussions and debates. However, they came to realise the camp had been provided only to remove COs from public view. They wanted to be able to perform useful duties, such as hospital work. When this request was turned down, the men decided to withdraw co-operation with the authorities.

Rogers and other prisoners spent three weeks in a punishment compound for this.

They were held in solitary confinement cells where the heat

and lack of air were stifling.

Meanwhile, the new Hautu camp was being built at the southern end of Lake Taupo. Early in 1942, Rogers was transferred there with the first batch of prisoners. It was open and primitive, he said.

He decided to co-operate with the authorities who asked him, as an electrician, to help install an electric generating plant and lights. However, he found this work took him away from the others and he missed the camaraderie.

As prisoner numbers increased, discipline became stricter and conditions harsher. Authorities distrusted the discussion groups and Methodist Church services in which Rogers joined. The men were asked to sign an agreement not to discuss the war or the way the camp was run. They refused and eight were picked out for a

show trial. The detention of the eight at Rangipo Prison until the end of the war always rankled with him.

He married Jean soon after his release in 1946. He expected to find work as a registered electrician but his insistence on telling prospective employers about his wartime stance cost him job opportunities.

At last he found work on the Lake Tekapo hydro project – though he and Jean had to consult maps to find out where it was.

They next moved to Burnham and Rogers worked for the Selwyn Plantation Board. In 1951 he switched to the local power board as an inspector/faultsman. The growing family lived at Irwell, Leeston and Halswell before Rogers retired in 1983.

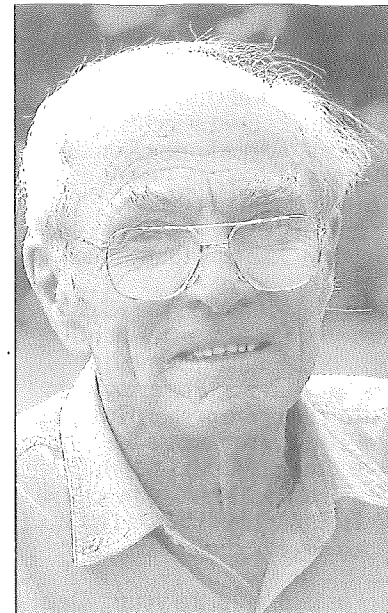
He took part in demonstrations, spoke and wrote on anti-war themes. He loved nature and

planted many native trees around the home he built at Halswell. He took part in community projects. He and Jean were keen trampers and travellers.

When a son “drew a ballot” for military training at the time of the Vietnam War, Rogers attended his appeal in the Christchurch Magistrate’s Court. The appeal was successful. At the end, Rogers was allowed to read a statement to the court. The magistrate then rose and formally apologised for New Zealand’s treatment of COs. For Rogers, this brought emotional closure to World War II.

MIKE CREAM

■ John William Rogers, born Whanganui, October 20, 1918; died Christchurch, February 12, 2013. Survived by wife Jean, sons Alan, Ken, Murray and Noel, his grandchildren and great-grandchildren.



Jack Rogers: Christian faith and pacifism were always central to his life.