

### **REPORT ON JOURNEY BY REFUGEE TRAIN**

On Saturday 17th Feb. two of us travelled by refugee train from Friedland to Bünde, near Osnabrück, via Elze and Hameln, leaving at 14.00 hours and arriving there just after midnight, a distance of about a hundred miles.

The journey itself was not as trying as that undertaken some days ago to Bad Segeberg, near Lübeck, as the weather was comparatively mild, but the overcrowded compartments, lack of windows, leaking roofs etc. made travelling conditions difficult enough.

The two main causes for complaint which we noticed were

- (a) baggage arrangements and
- (b) lack of proper information services.

The "Gepäckwagen", piled high with luggage, were not locked on either side, contrary to instructions the railway police are said to have had. At several stops en route passengers disembarked for other destinations and in some cases attempted to remove their luggage from the van at much trouble to themselves and much to the annoyance of others who were afraid of their own possessions being stolen in the process. On no such occasion was any railway official present, although there were presumably two, a guard and a "Zugführer" on the train during the whole journey.

(These two officials are relieved by others at each station where there is a change of locomotive - four times during the trip - and we saw them on only one occasion just as we left Friedland, perhaps not surprisingly, as the train is composed of at least thirty coaches and wagons and is several hundred yards in length.)

It might be objected that no one is allowed to leave the train en route in any case, but this seems to be incorrect as one of the luggage vans was officially marked "Only to Kreiensen", and at no station or stop was there any official to instruct passengers to remain on the train. In fact the attitude of all railway officials encountered in the semi-darkness of railway sidings was consistently unhelpful, and again no attempt was made to point out to passengers the dangers of descending on the lines where unlighted goods trains might be passing at any moment.

The information services at Friedland, regarding the destination of the train and conditions of travel appear to be quite inadequate. In one coach we spoke to one passenger who was trying to get to Bremen, one to Hamburg and several to Brunswick. None of them had been told where to change, simply that they should travel with this train which was going to Osnabrück. Most of those in this coach - homeless Refugees - had been directed to Hannover and were indignant when the train turned off before reaching there; the only likely explanation seemed to be that their destination was "Province Hannover", but this had not been made clear to them.

The few last minute instructions given over the loud speaker on the platform at Friedland are quite inefficient as most people are too busily engaged in finding a place for their luggage and families to pay strict attention. The train leader and guard are also of little help in giving information to those who need it - on one occasion we were told that the train leader had shelved on to us the responsibility for deciding whether the luggage vans could be opened en route.

We should like to make the following suggestions :

- (a) That some definite arrangements regarding loading and unloading of luggage vans should be come to and made clear to Refugees travelling on the trains.
- (b) That much more care should be taken during registration at Friedland in determining the proper destination of each family and informing them by which train they should travel, and if permissible, where the train will take them.
- (c) That several people should be chosen from among the passengers and given explicit instructions regarding conditions of travel, stopping places etc., which information they could then pass on the others seeking advice. (We met with two cases of self-appointed train leaders, who were of considerable help whenever they themselves could obtain the correct information.)

At Bünde station, the reception arrangements were excellently organised. The train was brought to the platform in two portions. The loudspeakers then informed the passengers that they should remain on board until further notice and while coffee was served out along the train by voluntary helpers, others made a complete inspection to determine who were homeless refugees, and who had homes to go to elsewhere.

Refugees with hand-luggage and mothers with children, sick and old people were first instructed to disembark and were escorted in batches of fifty to nearby halls and shelters where they were given a warm meal and shelter for the night; followed later by those others with heavier luggage to look after. These first helped to unload the contents of the vans on to the platform, where it remain under Police guard, until it could be taken away in the morning. Homeless Refugees and others are kept separate and instructions given them as to the proper procedure to follow on the further stages of their journey.

The homeless Refugees are taken by motor transport to various towns and villages in the Kreis the following morning, where they are then billeted out by the local authorities. Others are informed of the time of the train connection they must catch to reach their destinations in the Ruhr and Rhine lands - from now on they travel by normal train at their own expense.

The Commandant at Bünde made the following points :

- (1) That it would greatly help their work if homeless refugees could be placed in special carriages at Friedland and their luggage also in separate vans.
- (2) That arrangements might be made whereby each destination station should undertake to repair some of the carriage windows in the refugee trains whenever one called there - permission would of course have to be obtained to hold the trains for an hour or two longer than normal.
- (3) That one or two cases of typhus had been diagnosed on arrival from Friedland and that shortage of D.D.T. guns at Bünde prevented the staff there from organising a further delousing system at the station or in the village.

On the following day, Sunday, the 18th, we visited various stations between Osnabrück and Bad Oeynhausen to obtain information as the whereabouts of the various points in this area and Westphalia where Refugee trains arrive and their passengers are disembarked to be billeted out. Travelling was extremely difficult however, it being Sunday, and we returned to Vlotho, Red Cross H.Q. in the afternoon and set off the following morning to the Ruhr to discover what happened to those others from Friedland who tried to return to their former houses, disembarking finally at Dortmund.

The overcrowding in these trains is almost unbelievable, and accidents to those who travel on the outside are frequent.

The conditions under which refugees or returning evacuees are accepted at Dortmund do not seem to be very well defined. Those whose husbands or fathers are engaged in important work are allowed to stay, and also it appears that anyone who can find a home with relatives or friends, though a permit to remain in the town is not always given in these cases.

There appear to be no check points, on the railway or at the station to keep out people whose journey is "not really necessary" and those unfortunates who do not receive a permit to stay are housed in various "Übernachtungsstelle" for some days, fed on very meagre rations, told to leave the area to look for some other home. Arrangements are however, now being made to deal more satisfactorily with the problem of these people.

Something more could presumably be done at Friedland during registration to find out whether they really have homes to return to in the West and to point out to them the difficulties involved if they do not make these enquiries. More care should also be taken in filling in the destination on the registration form; the housing authority in Dortmund seemed to regard this as a kind of official acceptance of the Refugee into their area.

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*( Diese Fahrt wurde wiederum von Stan Slee und Ian Meldrum unternommen )*